

Sermon – Matthew 27:55-61 – “Can I Get a Witness?”

The text this morning is a small part of a much longer text that is the reading of the day in the lectionary I use, which is based on the principle of *lectio continua*. It could be a familiar one, because it is part of the passion narrative from the gospel of Matthew, one of the church’s accounts of the betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death of Jesus, which covers the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and because that text comes up in the revised common lectionary every three years as one of the readings for Palm Sunday, and because the RCL is used by many pastors and churches – so it **could** be very familiar, but on the other hand, because the full narrative is 128 verses long, and because it takes about 12 and a half minutes to read, and because of the constraints of the typical Sunday worship service, especially on Palm Sunday, wouldn’t normally allow for a reading that long, and because the RCL’s suggestion for a shorter passion narrative leaves this part of the story out, it could easily happen that this part of the text would **never** be read in a church, so it could be a decidedly **un**familiar text.

Whether or not it is familiar, it is a detail of that larger story, and I hope we can approach it in that spirit this morning, the way we might consider a detail from a larger work of art with some special interest, or the way we might return again and again to a particular facet of a memory that has been important to us.

So in that spirit, then, please listen for the word of God in

Matthew 27:55-61

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.

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

The Word of God for the people of God.

For better or for worse, focusing on this detail leaves out all the trauma.

Or rather – it leaves all the trauma, all the actual violence that is the theme of the long narrative that the Church knows by heart and to which it returns in its worship and symbol and theology over and over and over again **implicit** in the activity of these witnesses, these many women who were there, “looking on”

theorizing, if you will, as the Greek word for their activity is the very one that has given us our word for trying to make some comprehensive sense of something

Implicit, because what the many women, who are also there, are looking on **at** is all that trauma, all that violence.

Now, meaning no disrespect **at all**, trauma is trendy these days.

On the popular cultural front, Grey’s Anatomy has made a long-running, lucrative phenomenon out of it, and on the academic side, trauma studies is a growing field, in part, perhaps, because **trauma** is becoming our culture’s paradigm for what ails us human beings.

PTSD is a household word, for a reason: the American Psychological Association estimates that more than 7 million Americans suffer from post-traumatic shock disorder, a long-term disruptive response to trauma, which is itself an emotional response to some terrible event – like a violent accident, an assault, or a disaster.

A lot of people, including people we all know and interact with every day, have experienced trauma. About 60% of men and about 50% of women. About 1 in 10 women will develop PTSD at some point in her life, according to the US VA’s Center for PTSD. The shock waves of trauma can take a long time to lessen, and the aftershocks can strike us unpredictably and forcefully, and make people feel broken and shaken.

We’re learning that trauma affects our perceptions – what we see, what we hear, what we feel – as well as our memories – sometimes making them more vivid, like a scene illuminated by a flash of lightning, sometimes making them fragmented and disjointed; so that details of the picture get split off from whole, decontextualized, interfering with comprehension and integration.

All of this speaks to the fact that all the violence in our world – which is nothing new, after all – is hard to encounter, and almost equally hard to witness, and to bear witness to.

But the many women, who were also there, looking on, are engaged in this act of witnessing, of being, or becoming, witnesses –

That sounds simple enough, like something we ought to understand here in the church, as the church has been in the act of witnessing, of being or becoming a community of witness, for such a long time –

Yet, if we consider the experience of this witness with some care, it turns out to be ... not so simple at that.

It seems important that the women are in a **position** to be witnesses – that is, **there**, which is to say, where the violence is taking place, where the consequences of that violence are being wrapped up. In this story, the women are not the immediate targets of the violence – exactly. So - Would we describe this as violence against women? Isn't that supposed to be the **focus** of this day, that specific form and dynamic of violence that targets women specifically, women as such? **This** story seems to be about a different kind of violence, one more public, more official, more the kind of violence that is violence against men in every way, which was not supposed to be the focus of **this** day –

But then, in a discussion of “state terrorism,” political scientist Michael Stohl reminds us that “It is important to understand that in terrorism ... the **audience** of the act or threat of violence is more important than the immediate victim.” And the women are certainly members of the audience.

Then, considering the women who were there – Mary Magdalene, a close and beloved friend; two women who are identified specifically as mothers – considering what it means, how it feels, to know that someone is inflicting violence on a loved one, maybe our own child, or a neighbor's child – to be in a position to see this and know this and yet **not** be in a position to do what cries out to be done – to gather up that hurt, and banish it with a hug, a bandage, the proper human response of love and healing ... how is it possible, in that position, to keep all of this violence from devastating our categories.

The specific forms of violence that immediately target women, like intimate partner assault, and sexual assault in all its private and public variations, and ritualized violence, **should** claim our attention. It's just that there is so **much** violence in the world, and we are so **connected** to its targets, and even to its perpetrators, that the boundary lines that would protect us from feeling all that emotional response to disaster, that trauma, all at once keep blurring and crumbling in the face of it, and we can't help asking sometimes, where does the violence against women **stop**?

So these women, the ones named, presumably others who are not named, are **there** – in a place that is neither comfortable, nor safe – together, looking on rather than looking away from all that violence that is taking place –

Where ... it is exceedingly difficult to know how to understand this act of witness.

I get stuck here at this detail; I come back to it over and over and over again. I cannot tell whether they are there because they have chosen to be there ... because the women didn't **have** to be there, right, they could have left, or looked away ...

But as soon as I think that, as soon as I form that idea, I answer myself with a kind of horrified reaction, oh no, how could you **leave**, I mean, how could they leave?

Because that isn't what people **do**, that isn't what friends **do**, that isn't what lovers, mothers, do; friends, lovers, mothers, they we people don't just leave or look the other way when someone ... beloved and cared about is suffering, they **stay** with us, we **stay** together ...

The way women **go with** their friends, to terrible places – the doctor's office; the rape crisis center; the police station; the health clinic; court; the hospital, the emergency room ... hold our friends' hands; and if we can't hold their hands, say "I'll be here" ...

But ... suffering goes with this activity of going with ... since we are not immune, we are not closed off from the suffering of others, we can't help feeling some echo of the sufferer's pain, we human beings seem to have been made that way, to mirror and so to understand within our own human minds and bodies the feelings and thoughts of those we connect with.

So does this mean we are extolling some kind of voluntary embrace of suffering?

I hope not – because that has never turned out well – except that here we are in this place where there is so much violence, connected to one another in such profound ways, like the way these women are connected to Jesus, who they followed from Galilee – because if Galilee is anything at all like Corydon, Indiana where I live, which is questionable, but then again, unquestionable, they could have known Jesus since he was little, watched him grow up, known him as their neighbor's boy, their children's companion, taken turns watching him on busy days – lived with him. The text says they had followed him from there, and provided for him, or ministered to him – were his deacons – so we might need to call this final activity also a kind of providing for –

Providing presence, and by that presence communicating that there is something more in the world than all this violence and destruction, there is something about people and their lives together that was worth being alive for, that was worth being part of.

This is what we do for our friends and for our neighbors when we stay with them through their sufferings – it may not be that much, but the little that it is matters,

makes the sufferings ones that are being endured with others who commiserate, the inhumanities ones that are humanized by connection with the human. It's why one of the most terrible aspects of intimate partner violence is the systematic separation of the victim from family and friends, from the people who give her a meaningful context for her life, a support system, a framework within which to continue being a human being.

So, do we call this an act of courage – because it involves facing something fearful with determination?

Do we call this resistance – refusal to follow the script written by the powers of violence, that call for flight and self-securing? There's some real cause for pause there ...

Do we call this loyalty? Do we call it love? Do we say this willful presence of the women is a testimony to love that is costly, that in a situation as violent as this one exacts a terrible toll in suffering shared?

At least the women are together in this awful place, where life crosses over into death; where hope is crossing over into despair; this place at the outer boundary of experience -

In our culture, we have been accustomed to label places like this as being places of “the body,” and we have tended to assign women to these places, women as the ones whose role in life and in the world is to have something to do with “the body,” ... as if our human minds and spirits and souls were not involved in our physical problems, in the torments of our bodies, as if they were unmoved by our bodies' deaths.

What a strange idea that is.

What a strange compulsion we have had, to look away from the evidence of our senses, our own experience, the experience of our friends and lovers and children and neighbors; what a fragmented vision that has partitioned the intricate communion of coterminous nonidenticals that is life in the image of God into a forced marriage of separated, divided, opposed elements, one of them – the body – a prison, only the other – the spirit - potentially free and transcendent, and that only on the condition of its abandonment of the very ground of its connection with humanity, community, its ability to touch, hear, see, feel, to engage in the act of witness.

What a strange idea that is, that has dominated our collective imaginations so powerfully for so a long that we have met the witness of incarnation, the living God's insistent refusal to be limited by the nonsense of such “separations,” baffling and incomprehensible.

We need to look at matters differently. We need to recognize this act of witness as an act of body-and-mind, matter-and-spirit, the spirited action of thinking, feeling, willing whole beings. As such, it does constitute resistance, stubborn refusal to follow the script as prescribed, it does constitute a getting in the way on behalf of love and loyalty, whether or not it “does any good,” because the active rejection of the way of abandonment, of absence, of pain-free serenity without relationship, is itself, profoundly though vulnerably, good. It is the assertion of something good, it is the form of what is good, even under the worst of circumstances.

This witness, this witness to the tenacity of relationship, to the willful participation in the life of others ... this witness brings the women in this story face to face with the place of loss, of death, of genuine finality – a place neither comfortable nor safe. Nevertheless, as we anticipate from long years of hanging on to the traumatic dangerous sacred memory of this event, what is also there is the place of resurrection, or at least, the place of encounter with resurrection – the place of witness to impossible possibilities.

We, too are here, all of us, in a place where people, we, continue to remember and to tell a story of terrible violence, in this world where there is still so much violence, because we have been told and may even have seen for ourselves that all this violence is not, after all, the very end; because we have also learned that people can come back, even from death, even from an experience that is indistinguishable from death, even from trauma –

We are here on this day in this place, in a way with the many women who were also there, looking on, to join ourselves to that ministry of witness, to participate in its promise of life made whole.