

April 14, 2017 (Good Friday)

TEXT: Luke 23:50–56

TITLE: Waiting at the Cross

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

It is now the evening of Good Friday. According to the bible traditions, Jesus was crucified midday on this day; his body was removed from the cross and placed in a borrowed tomb with all the arrangements done quickly so as to be completed before sundown. This was important as the Jewish Sabbath began at sundown and no work of any kind was supposed to occur then. As tumultuous as the morning and afternoon of that Friday was—the trial before Pilate, the whipping, mocking, and horrible act of crucifixion, followed by the hurried, almost disrespectful rush to get Jesus' body into the tomb—once the sun went down, an eerie, uncomfortable calm set in. People went home, light candles, said the appropriate Jewish prayers for the start of the Sabbath. Yes, they grieved – they tried to understand what it meant for Jesus, the one lauded on Palm Sunday, the one they'd followed for so many months, the one from whom they'd witnessed miracles and learned so much—that this Jesus was now dead and gone.

The gospels tell us almost nothing about what went on during the time between Jesus' burial in the tomb and the early Sunday morning resurrection miracle 36 hours later. Maybe things would have been different if the crucifixion hadn't occurred so soon before the start of the Friday night Sabbath. Then again, we can well imagine the grief felt by the women and men disciples; there isn't much need to describe it in detail.

So like all those close to Jesus long ago, we find ourselves on a Friday evening confronting an empty cross. We find ourselves having to learn the vocabulary of grief—of learning to speak of someone in the past tense. It's not easy to do about Jesus—to speak of one who was so alive and so vital as now someone dead and buried. Then again, it's not easy to do with anyone we love—to speak of a parent, a spouse, a friend, a child in the past tense.

Thomas Lynch is a funeral director and a poet, and in his great little book called "The Undertaking" he said these simple words: *The only way out of grief is through it.* Some people work very hard to deny grief—to not think about it—so they don't bring up stories about loved ones now deceased, thinking that to share those memories only makes the death harder to accept. But I believe the reverse is true. Not to talk about a loved one who is gone, not to share stories, to laugh over silly memories, to weep over what has been lost is what makes a death hard to get over. The only way out of grief is through it—to see it as a necessary companion for this stage of life's journey. You don't need to embrace grief, but neither can you run from it.

Facing death honestly helps us live honestly and wisely. As it says in Psalm 90: *Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.* Or as it says in the old King James Version: *Teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.* Numbering our days both recognizes that they exist in finite supply and one day our life

will come to an end. That knowledge is the source of real wisdom, not only for us but for our children and those whom we love.

The psychologist Erik Erikson said, *Healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death.*

So we find ourselves facing death, facing an empty cross—and basically waiting. I'm glad for the gap between Good Friday and Easter. It's honest and it mirrors our own experiences with the death of a loved one. Someone dies and if this death was expected, we begin to do an orderly series of acts. We call family members and friends to let them know of the death. We contact a funeral home and a church and begin to finalize arrangements for removing the body and preparing the body and us for a funeral service. We begin changing "living arrangements" into categories appropriate for someone who is no longer living—cancelling services, subscriptions, bills; planning the disposition of furniture, household goods, even homes or apartments. Along the way, we realize that this person is no longer part of the process—cannot be called or consulted. Along the way, we begin to speak of him or her in the past tense.

That is similar to where we find ourselves now—confronted by an empty cross, a death and a loss. Grief is not so much something you get over as it is something to add to who you are, something you carry along with you as you continue your life's journey. Both of my parents are now deceased. I don't think of them every day, but I do think of them often. I know they'd be proud of my children. I smile as I remember things they would do, things they would talk about, how much they loved me and my family. I am sure each of you could likely say the same thing about someone you've loved who is now gone.

In a real way, Jesus not only experienced death, just as will be true for all of us; Jesus also gave us the chance to grieve—to wait at a cross for a while—because that experience is just as unavoidable. And the bible doesn't give us a lot of words for what to do while we grieve and wait, because frankly it is not a time for words. It is a time to quiet down, to breathe, to be aware of what you're feeling, and to begin gently fingering the hole now present in your heart—the gap now palpable in your spirit.

This is important. If you don't take time to grieve, to quiet down, to accept the reality of death, and name the ways you miss those you love, then you don't have a place to put the related experiences of resurrection—of new life and hope. We need to look at the cross honestly and consider how we feel about it honestly, so that we can soon turn our gaze to the empty tomb and consider how we feel about that just as honestly. What does resurrection mean to us, a people who grieve and die and mourn losses? What does it mean to us right now, when we can't call people or finish conversations since they now exist in the past tense to us present tense people? What are the glimpses of resurrection that bring us healing now—and what are the assurances of Easter resurrection that give us lasting hope for the future? Will there be a time of reunion—of continuing what was interrupted?

We are promised that love is eternal; that is the central message of both Good Friday and Easter Sunday and all the hours in-between. Love is stronger than death. Love can include a Savior's healing touch and a Savior's death on a cross and a promise to be with us always to the end of the age. It is about love we should think as we look at an empty cross and grieve for a while. Be patient for a while. Take a Sabbath rest as did the grieving women and men disciples that first Good Friday. All of this is part of God's plan. And believe the good news—that hope and resurrection joy come in the morning.

AMEN