



**ALL SAINTS CHURCH**  
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

### **Standing By Jesus**

A meditation by the Rev. Wilma Jakobsen  
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‘There they crucified him.’ Only four words. Perhaps there was no description needed for the readers, as people then were familiar with this practice of Roman imperial torture and execution for runaway slaves and rebel insurgents. It was never used on Roman citizens, never used in Rome or Italy, but in the outer provinces of the empire as a way of ensuring the imperial domination over any who would dare to challenge the imperial powers. It was intended to be a public spectacle, a deterrent to any who might aspire to subvert Roman law and order. It was a cruel form of capital punishment, not just because of the suffering and humiliation, but also because there might be nothing left of the body for burial. The whole process was designed to extend suffering over many hours, if not days -- to maximize pain, humiliation, and shame as a deterrent.

Who was there that day? Who was standing by? Who was standing by Jesus? Jerusalem was a busy place, in many ways the crossroads of the world at that time. Golgotha was near the city, and there would have been many passing by and many standing by to watch this public spectacle. Some were there just to watch, perhaps to jeer. Some, like the soldiers, were there because it was their job. Some were faithful followers standing by Jesus in his last hours. Let us picture the scene, described in the reading in three vignettes.

The first vignette is Pilate, standing by what he had written. As we look up at the cross, above Jesus there is a rough wooden sign nailed to the top. The inscription that Pilate had written on it was part of the public humiliation. Like many others before him, the wooden placard above his head had probably been hung around Jesus’ neck as he walked the Via Dolorosa to his death.

"Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" - written three times in Hebrew, Latin and Greek – using the common language of the Jewish people, the official language of the Roman conquerors, and the language of commerce in the Mediterranean region. The notice is full of irony.

The religious authorities were furious with Pilate and wanted it changed. Pilate probably intended it as sarcasm. What kind of king would hang there in that way while people stared at his humiliation and suffering? It was a calculated snub on Pilate’s part. He clearly intended to reiterate to the Jewish leaders just who was in charge of Palestine. And it wasn't them. Thus he stood by what he had written. This was his crucifixion, his territory, his responsibility. Despite his shuttle efforts not to sentence Jesus, he had bowed to popular opinion rather than to uphold principle, and caved to political expediency and protecting his reputation. This time he would show the religious leaders that he had the power.

John saw in that sign an example of someone inadvertently saying more than they knew. For John, Jesus was and is "the King of the Jews." In his gospel he wanted everyone to know that. Jesus himself in

chapter 12 had said earlier, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). John wants us to see in this moment that Jesus' death on the cross is the salvation of the whole world. As much as this broken man on a cross looks nothing like a king, through his execution and through his love and forgiveness he will offer healing and wholeness to a broken world.

The second vignette - not far away there are four Roman soldiers standing by the cross. It's their job to be there. They might almost be a bunch of ordinary guys drinking beer and playing poker, unconcerned that just a few feet away, a man is dying the most horrible death. Their interest in Jesus is their opportunism, what extra they can get from this day's work, who can score the most possessions. They gamble for the tunic, possibly Jesus' most valuable possession. They are standing by Jesus, seeing what they can get from him. In the reading, John connects the action of the soldiers to Psalm 22. It's part of the purpose of this gospel, to show that even Jesus' death was all God's purpose, the purpose of love and healing, forgiveness and salvation.

Perhaps we are not so unlike the soldiers. Sometimes we act as though faith were part of a cost-benefit analysis, outcomes based faith. "If I do this, I should, or I hope to get that in return." That is a long way from a relationship with God to which we are invited, based on love and grace and trust.

The third vignette. Look closer at the cross and there is a small group of people huddled around it - women, and the young disciple whom Jesus loved, standing by Jesus. The men had fled, it was too dangerous for them to be there.

Imagine you are standing there, looking up at a person you love dearly...and you are utterly powerless. All of the might of Rome, all of the hatred of the religious leaders is stacked against this man. There is literally nothing they can do. You have felt that way sometime. Perhaps when someone you love is very, very sick. Perhaps you feel that way about the possibilities you fear in the future...the feelings roll around, events are unfolding...and there is nothing you can do about it. You feel powerless.

The group faithfully stand by Jesus there as he bleeds and sweats and labors. They say, just by their silent presence, the only thing they can say: "We are here. We are with you. We care. There is nothing we can do for you." They never thought they would be in that spot. Never thought, as people of faith, that they could be in such pain. Never thought, perhaps, that God would allow that. Yet there they stand looking up at their Lord, their teacher, their role model, their friend, their beloved...their son.

The group standing by Jesus includes his mother.  
There's a poem by Sylvia Sands that reflects on her on this day:

People are kind.  
Come away, they cry.  
No need to put yourself through this.  
He'll understand.

But I am his mother,  
And though nails pierce his body,

And a sword sunders my soul,  
I must stand with him,  
I must stand by him,  
I must stand up in this his hour of dying.

And yet, and yet,  
There's more at stake than that.

From somewhere within  
This horror of great darkness,  
Gabriel-haunted still,  
I dream dreams, hear voices,  
I see others.

Mothers, sons, brothers, daughters,  
Sisters, fathers, friends, lovers,  
A vast army who will not turn away;  
Clad in the armour of fidelity  
And hollow-eyed courage,  
They will stand by,  
Stand with,  
Stand up,  
In those slow, dimming,  
Dove-grey hours of dying...

Can you imagine what that day was like for her? If we have spent time with a loved one in their suffering and dying days and hours, we can only begin to imagine. Perhaps only a mother can begin to connect with her agony. Perhaps only a mother who has lost a child in death can identify in any way. How many mothers have actually watched their sons die such a cruel and unusual punishment without justification? This mother had been visited by an angel before his birth proclaiming that her son would be the Son of God. Simeon had prophesied in the temple at Jesus' dedication that a sword would pierce her soul. That day the sword sunk deep.

Jesus looks up and sees his friend, his "Beloved Disciple" there...and Mary his mother. And he calls out to her, "Woman, here is your son." And to hers, "Here is your mother." It is a profound moment.

In the Mediterranean world of the first century, kinship constituted the core of all human relationships. Maintaining and strengthening family bonds and the honor of the clan, especially the home, was imperative. From the beginning of the gospel of John to this end at the cross, John shows Jesus establishing a new kinship grouping among his disciples. The word used to say that John took Mary into his home, does not actually mean that she moved in with John into his house, but rather that they created a new relationship, one which made them responsible for each other. It created a new community, of relationship and responsibility and mutual caring and support. (Mark Stibbes): In giving these two people to one another, Jesus begins a new family at his death, a new community. Ultimately this community is the community of the church, the family of God, which against all odds would explode out into the world and be the means of bringing about the reign of God.

I read a story of a remarkable incident some years ago in Chicago, involving two young men – one shot by the other. The 14-year old slayer was apprehended, put on trial, and convicted. As the parents of the young man who had been shot observed their son’s assailant – still alive –something prodded them to look further into his story. Against their better judgment, not to mention conventional wisdom, they started visiting him in jail. Initial fear and curiosity changed to attraction and intrigue. They found themselves fascinated with their only son’s assassin.

The more they learned about him, the more they came to understand the forces that contributed to his terrible deed. And like most loving parents, when they really understood these dynamics, there was little to forgive. They wondered at a reality now made fresh to them – that so many children have no home while their son’s room in theirs stood empty.

The time came when they asked the young man who’d been serving his time, if they could take him into their home; if he would allow them to become his adoptive parents. What had transpired two thousand years ago at Golgotha was brought to Chicago in recent times. That is, the mystery of the cross was borne out in human struggle and crisis, struggle and crisis that get relived in the human family in every generation and in every culture. In surrendering their anger at the loss of their son, they embraced his killer and took him into their home. A new relationship was forged. (Michael H. Crosby, in ‘The Seven Last Words.’ pg74) What a challenge to us and how we live in community, live out community, live with those who are our community, like them or not. Both a challenge in the giving and forgiving we offer, and a challenge for us to receive the giving and forgiveness that is offered.

Three vignettes. People standing by Jesus, in political expediency and power exerted, in opportunism and simply doing a job, in faithful, loyal, courageous, caring presence and in a new community of loving relationship and support. Do we see ourselves in any of these people today? Where would we find ourselves standing by Jesus? How do we need to hear and receive the message of love and grace and forgiveness and healing today?

The story is told of a mother whose little girl is late coming home from school one day. As the minutes tick by the mother gets more and more worried. Five minutes go by, ten minutes go by, and the mother does not know where her little girl can be. Fifteen minutes go by, twenty minutes and the mother starts to imagine the terrible things that may have befallen her daughter. Twenty-five minutes go by and the mother is convinced something awful has happened. Thirty minutes and the mother is on the verge of calling the police.

Suddenly the little girl waltzes through the back door without a care in the world. The mother sweeps her daughter up in her arms, deeply relieved she is safe. But as is the way with parents, relief quickly turns to anger: ‘Where have you been?!’ the mother cries. ‘Didn’t you realize how worried I would be about you?’

Well, it turns out that all this while the little girl had been next door at the house of a woman who had recently lost her husband. ‘What have you been doing worrying that poor lady next door?’ the mother asks crossly.

‘I haven’t been worrying her,’ says the little girl. ‘I’ve been comforting her.’  
‘Comforting her!’ retorts the mother. ‘What could you possibly do to comfort her?’

The little girl replies, 'I climbed into her lap and cried with her.' (Stephen Cottrell, 'I Thirst', p. 18-19) This story gets to the heart of Jesus' suffering. For this is what God is like. In Jesus, God shares in our humanity. And at the cross, Jesus climbs up into our laps, as it were, and cries with us. Jesus shares in our suffering.

We know we all experience a great deal of suffering in this world.

We are all subjected to heartache and frustration. We encounter illness and injury. Sometimes suffering and trauma is inflicted upon us by others. We suffer the loss of loved ones and suffer the knowledge of our own, inevitable, deaths. There is the suffering of countless, voiceless people around the world in so many ways.

It is natural for us to cry out against this suffering. To wonder why God doesn't stop it, why God doesn't bring all suffering to an end?

But God doesn't do that. Instead, we are offered the suffering of Jesus on the cross, in solidarity with us and our suffering. That's not to say that your suffering is not so bad because Jesus suffered so much worse. But instead, that God does understand. When you suffer, God knows what you are going through.

"Wherever there is pain in the world, wherever someone cries out, thirsty for water, afflicted with grief, tormented by pain or craving love, we hear the cry of the one who has come down to earth to show us what God is like." (Cottrell, p. 19) We discover that God is suffering too.

As we are standing by Jesus today in his death, let us know that Jesus is standing by us no matter what we are going through. There is no hell that we can endure that Jesus is not there with us. Today whether we suffer or whether life is good for us, we are invited to be the faithful presence of the women at the cross, to be the new community of caring, for ourselves and for others, as we live out the grace and love and companion presence that Jesus offers us, no matter what.

Let us pray:

*Jesus, stand by us in our lives today,  
Help us know your presence with us no matter what.  
Give us grace to be your presence to others, to ourselves  
And to the world.*

AMEN.