

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 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 19:25b-27

The liturgies of Holy Week are remarkable, aren't they? They are majestic while also being modest. They are emotionally charged, overwhelmingly dramatic and so, so personal. During these services, we walk through Jesus' last days in Jerusalem – we are with him as he shares his final meal with the disciples...we are with him as he kneels to wash their feet...we are with him as he hangs on the cross and soon, we will be with him when emerges from the tomb.

I feel incredibly connected to Jesus during Holy Week – so connected that it's easy to approach Jesus' dying on the cross as a historical event that I relive on Good Friday each year. It's easy to approach the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as a one-time event that took place far away, in another country, safely in the past.

But as we hear the words from John's Gospel, when we sing the words of Carol Peterson's hymn "At the Foot of the Cross," it is impossible to avoid the ongoing reality of the crucifixion. The crucifixion is enduring, it is happening again and again and again. The crucifixion is far from a singular event that took place some 2000 years ago on a hill outside of Jerusalem. It is every single day - especially for poor bodies, black bodies, young bodies, women's bodies.

The crucifixion is ongoing and Good Friday reminds us of it. Good Friday reminds us what we humans are capable of doing – that we are capable of welcoming the Son of God with joyous shouts of Hosanna, only then to stand idly by as he’s killed or even worse run away so we don’t have to watch it ourselves. Tonight, we gather to grieve and remember this tragedy of our human condition. Tonight, we lament how often we remain quiet when these crucifixions happen.

John’s account of the gospel tells us that most of the men who followed Jesus during his earthly ministry desert him at the cross....perhaps out of fear or guilt or confusion. Whatever the reason, they are gone now. **It is** Jesus’ **female** followers including his mother and his aunt who remain observing his slow, torturous death. All four NT Gospels mention this striking fact,¹ though John alone specifies that mother Mary was there.

But this should be no surprise to us. One of the cruelest things in life is for parents to outlive their own children. I’ve heard countless parishioners say they’d give anything to swap places with a child dying from an incurable sickness. One woman told me in tears that “no mother should ever have to see her son suffer like this.” And, I am certain Mary would have whispered similar words to her sister as they as stood near the cross. Of course she would be there.

¹ Matt 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 23:49; John 19:25

Many Christians believe that Mary understood that the death of her son was part of God's mysterious plan, that it was inevitable, that she expected it. But the Gospels don't tell us much about her experience or her faith at the time of Jesus' death. She surely knew from the very beginning that Jesus was extraordinary and that God had something very special in store for him. There were moments when she probably understood that Jesus' future would not be an easy one, for him or for her. But does this mean it made the crucifixion any easier on Mary?

No. I think Mary feels the pain any of us would feel if it were our child nailed to the cross. As she stands as close to the cross as she can, watching blood run down his stripped body, listening to his pained cries, there is no doubt in my mind that she feels everything that we would feel if it were our child.

Similarly, it is tempting for us living comfortable, privileged American lives to look at women in the developing world and think that when their children die from malnutrition or malaria or illnesses borne from unclean water, it doesn't hurt them as much because they surely understand death as a likely possibility. Infant mortality is so common, life expectancy is so low - *certainly* their children's deaths don't hurt them as much as it would hurt us if our child was to die.

Or that women raising children in Chicago's South Side don't feel the heart-breaking pain we would feel when their sons are killed by gunfire, because bullets fly so freely in that neighborhood, *clearly* they know it's likely to happen.

Or all the Syrian mothers whose children died from chemical warfare this month ... perhaps it wasn't as hard for them since 55,000 children have already died in their country over the past six years. They know how likely it was that their children would die in this war or from trying to escape it – so we rationalize that it must hurt less when it actually happens.

What about the seven mothers who will sit across from Arkansas' execution chamber and watch their sons die by lethal injection over the next two weeks? Their sons are convicted murders, so surely their grief is not as intense.

And what about the mothers in South Sudan trying to raise children amidst rampant gunfire, arson, sexual predators and minimal access to food. They watch helplessly as their children wither away from malnutrition or are whisked away by violent soldiers. Is their pain somehow less than our pain would be? Is it?

Deep down, we must know that their grief is as deep as our grief. Deep down, we must know that they weep the same way that we weep. A mother's pain at her child's death, is the same no matter where she lives in the world. No matter if death has become commonplace. Yes, the crucifixion is ongoing. It is everywhere. And we all feel the pain.

I'm confident that our responsibility as Christ's disciples today is to witness the crucifixions before us. We cannot run or hide or create rationalize why it's easier for mothers who are different than us to lose their children. We must witness these crucifixions—of Jesus, of Syrian children, of black children, teenagers & men, of

prisoners on death row. We must look at the ones we have pierced, the ones for whom we shouted “crucify him,” the ones from whom we’ve run away.

But while we are there, accepting our responsibility we must also hear the words of Jesus from his own cross. Forgive them all, Father. Forgive them, he says. And then he breathes the Spirit on us: *Woman*, he says to his mother Mary, *behold your son*. And to his dearest friend: *Behold your mother*. Even in this Good Friday time in our lives, our God does not abandon us. God doesn’t leave us without any guidance in these moments of tragedy and grief. God is with Jesus on the cross and God is with us today. As Jesus approaches death what he is most concerned about is his mother and his friends. He offers instructions while he’s dying about how they are to move forward after his death.

This is the good news of Good Friday, and the radical challenge of the resurrection. Jesus, with his broken body, breaks down the walls that divide humanity, and makes us into a new family as children of God. And if we are to remember his death and enter his life, we must claim each other--neighbors, strangers, those across socio-economic and racial divisions -- and refuse to be separated. These mothers who know such anguish and agony are our mothers, and their children are our children. Because nobody is beyond the family that Jesus establishes while he hangs from the cross. He has given us to one another. We must take responsibility for one another and all the ongoing crucifixions in our world. We must love one another as he has loved us.