

The View from Calvary
John 19:23-25

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

We have been following Mary, the mother of our Lord, and her relationship with her Son. Our primary interest along the way has been to learn how to incorporate Jesus into our lives. Today we come to Calvary, the hill of the cross. Our text for today simply says that Mary was there at the foot of the cross along with her sister and two other women.

Now I'm going to ask you to do something this morning as a way of approaching this text. Whatever you do, don't try this at home. But I think it is safe to do in the sanctuary for the several minutes of this sermon. What I want you to do is to forget what you know about Easter. Try to put out of your mind all you've heard about the resurrection. It's a ghastly thing to ask, I know, but as a kind of thought experiment and just for the time of this sermon, forget, please, everything you know about Easter. That will help you get into the heart and mind of Mary as she stands beneath the cross of Jesus as she does in our text.

At this stage of the New Testament story, Mary does not know anything about Easter Sunday. All she has, all that can rivet her attention, is this awful Friday. There she stands at the foot of the cross. What is it that she sees on Calvary's hill?

Mary sees the suffering of her Son.

Back before Jesus was born she heard from an angel about having a boy, and she said to the angel, "How can this be?" (Lk. 1:34) When that boy was just a newborn, shepherds wholly unknown to her and anyone in the family came to his cradle with breathless excitement. Wise men from a far off foreign land came, too. We are told Mary pondered all this in her heart (Lk. 2:19); her pondering must have been along the lines of "how can this be?" When she and Joseph and their little one had to flee the place they were and become refugees in Egypt for a time (Mt. 2:13ff), she must have wondered along every step of the way "how can this be happening?" So now, at the foot of the cross, looking with a mother's love on the Son's gross and undeserved suffering, her thought must have been, when it could be coherent, "how can this be happening?"

Mary saw her Son's suffering and she saw the defeat of his ideals. He taught love. He taught acceptance. He taught being welcoming to the stranger, generous to the enemy, forgiving toward the perpetrator of wrong, and kindness to the poor and forlorn. The message of good news to the poor, the captive, and the outcast was voted to defeat by the shouting crowd and the pounding of the nails that pierced his hands and feet.

Mary saw the suffering of her Son, the defeat of his ideas, and the departure of his friends. A few were there: Mary's sister was there; Mary Clopas was there; Mary Magdalene was

there. The text for my next sermon – two weeks from today – the verse that follows immediately after the one for today – will say that one of the disciples was there; we are fairly certain it was John. But all the rest had scattered right soon after Gethsemane.

Mary saw the suffering of her Son, the defeat of his ideals, the departure of his friends, and the disrespect that was shown him. He was spat upon. He was jeered. He was mocked. The little bit of property he had – just a few items of clothing – were divvied up among his executioners and the best bit – a fine tunic – was gambled for.

No mother should ever have to see what Mary saw at Calvary. But she saw all this suffering of her Son.

We can see the suffering of Christ.

Let's make this contemporary. Look out upon society now. Open a newspaper; sit down to the television news; turn to your favorite electronic device to scan the headlines of current events. Forget what you know about Easter. Look out upon society as it is today and I think you will find that we are still in the awful hours of Friday. I think you will hear the scraping of the cross as it is being dragged up the hill and the echo of the hammer pounding the nails that pierce our Lord's hands and feet. Look out upon society as it now is and I think you will see even now the suffering of Christ.

Christ Jesus is suffering today because the church is suffering. Did he not say about Peter's great confession of faith that day at Caesarea Philippi that he was going to build his church on that rock of a confession and that not even the gates of Hell were going to prevail against it? (Mt. 16:18) Well, how fares the church today? To ask the question is to answer it. Not long ago the field of religious publishing had a glut of books on church growth. Gradually I am seeing now more ads for books on how to close a church and how to be the pastor of a congregation that is dying. Think of the UCC alone; it is not the whole of Christianity, of course, but it is a piece of it. When I traveled to Kenya in 1995 to represent our Association, I carried in my notebook a page of facts about the UCC. We then had 6,300 churches, 1.5 million members, and the average size of a congregation of our denomination was 250. Now that notebook page would have to say the UCC has 4,882 churches, 824,866 members, and an average church size of 171 members. "On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross . . ." It's not far away. It is here.

Christ Jesus is suffering now because the church is suffering and because the truth is suffering. Did he not say that you will know the truth and the truth will make you free? (Jn. 8:32) How fares the truth today? To ask the question is to answer it. Lies and half-truths and spin seem to be the order of the day. The textbook for the Logic class I had in college carried problems to solve using Logic. One problem began by supposing a certain mythical community in which politicians always lie and non-politicians always tell the truth. Three people from that community say something to you and your dilemma as the problem-solver is to discern how many of the three are politicians.¹ Need I say more to make my point? It can seem as though we are living in that untrustworthy world today. "On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross . . ." It's not far away. It is here.

¹ Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, fourth edition (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 37-38,

Christ Jesus is suffering today because the church is suffering, because the truth is suffering, and because children and the poor and the unfortunate are suffering. Did he not say that as we do to the little ones around us we do to him? (Mt. 25:40) Didn't he put a child in his midst and say it would be better for a millstone to be tied around your neck and be thrown into the sea than to mistreat a child? (Mt. 18:2, 6) How does it fare with children today? Again, to ask is to answer. Reports all too frequent tell of child pornography, child neglect, child abuse at the hands of priests, pastors, and teachers; and none of this begins to say anything about children in cages. A nation isn't measured by how well its stock market is doing. It is measured by how well the least of these are doing. "On a hill far away" It's not far away. It is here.

Our view from Calvary today is still that of a suffering Christ.

Before we end our work of taking this view from Calvary this morning, let's be sure to get right back on the right side of Easter.² Even so, let's not forget what we've seen today.

Mary came to know the absolute thrill of Easter morning. Each appearance of her Son, each report of his resurrection, must have made her heart leap with excitement. Yet I suppose that even after that wonderful Sunday she never forgot what she saw of the agony of the cross that Friday.

And so, by all means let us rejoice in the resurrection, in the blessed truth that Jesus is able even now to break through everything that is diabolical and terrible and troubling. He is able to bless the church, take hold of the truth, and uplift the little ones. But let us never overlook the ugliness and the agony of what he has before him now to break through.

Like Mary then and there at the foot of the cross, let's be with Jesus here and now at the Calvary of our time. And let what we see from Calvary inspire and determine our work today – work for the church, work for the truth, and work for the poor and unfortunate.

² The phrase comes from James S. Stewart, *The Strong Name* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 35.