“Were You There?”

“Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.”

Death notices normally contain basic information about a person who has recently died. They inform us of when and where the death took place, some biographical information about the deceased family and occupation, and the details of visitation and the funeral service. In some instances, the obituary will report on the circumstances surrounding this person’s death: if they died suddenly or after a long illness, the place where their death took place – and in some cases, the fact that they died “surrounded by family and friends.” This last piece of information can be vitally important, because it is an indication that this person was not alone in the hour of death, that they knew they were in the presence of those they loved even as they drew their final breath. It is also comforting for those who are mourning this person’s death to know that they were there when the death occurred, and were able to experience their beloved’s final moments – as painful as this experience must have been for them.

We are not always able to be with one we love in their final moments of life; both of my parents died while I was some distance away from them. Sometimes, a person waits until their loved ones leave the room (even for a moment) so that they will not have to witness their death. Sometimes a death is so sudden, so unexpected, or so violent that there is no time to gather at one’s bedside; in such instances, it is the time of visitation that offers an opportunity to be with the deceased to speak our goodbyes and commend them into God’s loving care, surrounded by family and friends who gather to be our source of strength and support when death touches our lives. No matter how the death occurs, we know that we cannot be alone in this situation; we need to be with the one whose life is passing away, or those who are left behind to grieve their death, when we find ourselves walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

Even as our crucified Lord fulfills Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering servant who “was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity…” (Isaiah 53:3), he does not die alone. He has suffered betrayal at the hands of one disciple, denial from another, and desertion from all those who had vowed that they would follow him. But there are three persons who did not desert our Lord in his hour of suffering, three women who remain at his side as he cries out “‘It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” (John 19:30). Jesus dies surrounded by three women who endure the horrors of his crucifixion because their love for Jesus is so strong that they stand with him until he draws his final breath: “Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.” (19:25).

All of the Gospels mention the presence of women at the crucifixion. The diversity of lists suggests the richness of the tradition about the faithful women who attended Jesus at his death. They refused to allow fear or intimidation deter them from being present in the hour of his death, so that even those he was despised and rejected by many he might know that he had not been completely abandoned or forsaken. They were there when they crucified our Lord; they were witnesses to the moment he bowed his head and gave up his spirit; and they were there when they took his lifeless body down from the cross and laid it in the tomb that had been provided by Joseph of Arimathea: “The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.” (Luke 23:55-56). As they were there with Jesus in his final moments, they were also there when he was buried and made plans to return to be with him one final time, to give his body a proper burial that he deserved.

The women who stand by Jesus in his hour of death are present to support him and to care for his body after he bows his head and gives up his spirit. But they also play another critical role in the story of the
Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ: they are witnesses to his crucifixion and death, the means through which future generations of Christians would know what occurred on that first Good Friday, that on this day Jesus was truly “crucified, died, and was buried.” They are the witnesses to what would become the central proclamation of the Christian faith:

- “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God … we proclaim Christ crucified … the power of God and the wisdom of God.” – 1 Corinthians 1:18, 23-24.

The witness of the faithful women who stand with Jesus and testify to his crucifixion and death would later stand against heresies such as Docetism, which stated that Jesus only appeared to be human, but that human form was in reality an illusion. The women who were present testified that Jesus was indeed fully human, and that his suffering and death on the Cross were quite real and extremely excruciating. They are witnesses to the message of the Cross that is at the heart of the Christian faith, because it is in the Crucifixion that God in Christ reveals the fullness of God’s nature and the means through which God chooses to reconcile humanity to God and to one another.

- “Jesus as Son of God is not painted with the colours of his resurrection glory, but with the colours of his passion and death on the cross. The Son of God is not first at work in his exaltation and glory, but in his humiliation and lowliness. The ‘Son of God’ is here the representative and revealer of God in a godless and godforsaken world. That means that God represents and reveals himself in the surrender of Jesus and in his passion and death on the cross.” – Jurgen Moltmann, The Crucified God.

As the women stood with Jesus in the hour of his suffering and witnessed his death on the cross, so do we gather today to stand with our Lord in his final hour and to bear witness to his death on the cross. While Good Friday is observed in our country as a statutory holiday in which business, banks, and stores are closed, it is a day that many choose to avoid, because “the cross is not and cannot be loved.” (Moltmann). It is much easier to gather on Easter Sunday to celebrate the resurrection of Christ than to worship on Good Friday in the midst of the deep sadness that we feel as we stand beneath the Cross of Jesus and hear the account of his suffering and death. The question I asked as a child is the question we may ask during this day of sorrow: “What’s so ‘good’ about Good Friday?” Yet as it is important to be present in the final hours of the life of one we love; as it is a tremendous source of strength and support when we gather together to share our mutual sorrows and woes; so is it vital for us to be here today to join the faithful women at Golgotha to bear witness to the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, who suffered and died “for us and for our salvation.”

- “He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness…” – Small Catechism.

We gather together today to once again be present on this day in which our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ died so that we too can witness to his death and the power of the Cross, which is not only the symbol of our faith but the means through which God has reconciled the world to himself, the source of our salvation.

- “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But
more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” – Romans 5:6-11.

The faithful women at Golgotha stand with Jesus in the hour of his death and stand for us as witnesses to the reality of his crucifixion for our sake. But they also serve another crucial role: these same women who witnessed Jesus’ death and burial are the women who will come to the tomb in the early hours of that first Easter morning and witness the fulfillment of Jesus’ prediction that he would suffer and die, but would also rise again:

· “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.” – Mark 10:33-34.

While each of the Gospels differs in the women who are present at the empty tomb on Easter morning, it is the same women who are with Jesus and witness his death who now witness the absence of his corpse and hear the words of the angel offer words of comfort and good news:

· “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” – Mark 16:6-7.

As the women were there when our Lord was crucified, died, and was buried, so now are they present to witness and proclaim the good news that Christ is risen, and because he lives we shall live also, for our hope is rooted in what God has done for us in Christ in both his death and his resurrection:

· “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the death by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” – Romans 6:3-5.

These are the words that are spoken to us when we gather together to mourn the loss of a loved one at whose side we remain both in the hour of their death and as we commend them into the loving care of God. They are the words of confident hope that are rooted in the witness of the faithful women who bore witness to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is the Word that turns our mourning into dancing as it proclaims to us the good news that as death was not the final word for Jesus, neither is death the final word for us. When we are baptized in the name of our crucified and risen Lord, we are baptized into the one whose death destroyed the power of death and whose resurrection is our assurance that “neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever.” Even as we stand at the graveside to commend our sister or brother to their final resting place, the witness of these faithful women is the witness we continue to share:

· “Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” – 1 Corinthians 15:51-57.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
If a death notice had been published in Jerusalem on that first Good Friday, it would read that Jesus of Nazareth had died at Golgotha surrounded by family and friends. The obituary for our Lord and Saviour that would be written on this Good Friday would read the same: on this day, our Lord Jesus Christ suffered and died, surrounded by his friends, his faithful sisters and brothers who stood by his side, witnessed his death, and would go forth to proclaim the news that Christ has indeed died for us and for our salvation – and will soon gather again to be “there when God raised him from the tomb.” Amen.