
Bearing Witness

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Palm Sunday – Year B

I used to have to work to get into the spirit of Holy Week. I'd focus on what Jesus had gone through—and try to connect to it emotionally, and extract a spiritual lesson from it.

That changed when I got close to someone on death row, and the events of this week—Jesus' deathwatch and execution—became less abstract and distant, and I less eager to find spiritual insight or redemptive value in them. Rather, as I hear the Passion story today, what I really want to do is be quiet, and cry.

But don't worry; I won't! I'm aware that you're expecting a sermon! So, instead, I'll share some of this experience with you, as it is in the background of how I experience this week and anything I might say about it, anyway.

Three years ago, after sixteen years in prison, my friend Kelly Gissendaner received her first death warrant. It gave her a date and a time for her execution, and put her on formal "deathwatch." During this eight-day period, officers had to watch and document her every move, around the clock. Medical staff closely monitored her health and everything she ate and drank. Other inmates were watching, too, as they saw their fate bound with hers. So were her family and friends, of course, and her victim's family.

It was a hard place to be, for her, and for all of those watching, or forced to participate. It was hard to stay in that morally confusing place: to remember at one and the same time God's love for her, and for those she'd hurt, and for those who were hurting her now.

I wanted to protect myself and reassert control, by saying the right thing, doing something to make it better, making this fit into my understanding of God and the world.

But none of this made sense. The truth was that I felt so helpless. So scared—not just for her, but also for me, and for my faith.

But at times like this, you do what you have to do. So I showed up anyway, even though I didn't know what to say or what to do. And we passed time, reading psalms and playing *I Spy*; talking about *Survivor* and then about dying; dreaming of future grandchildren and bike rides, while planning her funeral.

Then, she was taken away to Jackson, where this state's death chamber is, and executed, as she sang *Amazing Grace* and said again how sorry she was. With God's help, she had held onto hope, even as the contours of that hope kept shifting. And I will never see Holy Week in the same way after this.

For one, I'm much more sympathetic toward Jesus' disciples, who turned away from him during his deathwatch, falling asleep when he needed them to keep vigil, betraying him for money or a good cause, denying him, running away. I get it! They didn't know what to say, either. They weren't sure what to believe or hope for anymore. They wanted to be on the right side. They didn't think they could handle this, and they were afraid for their lives and reputations.

And I stand in newfound awe at the courage of those who *did* stay with him and were able to face what was happening: the woman who anointed him on his way to Jerusalem with a jarful of expensive ointment, like you'd use to anoint a king or prophet, or a dead man. She saw what was coming and did not turn away, though it was horrifying and made no sense. And there were the women who followed him all the way to the cross, or as close as they were allowed—who stayed with him, and bore witness to this painful, shameful death.

This is not just their story, or mine. *It's* our story today, too. There are, of course, all kinds of deathwatches. Even if you've never gone through an official one, you know what it is to wait and watch and hope with a loved one who's dying, or stuck in a prison of grief, addiction, depression, or any kind of dark night of the soul that tries their faith, and yours. You know the feeling of inadequacy and fear. The temptation of wanting to fix it, to say the right thing, to explain it away, to reestablish control, to make them—and yourself—feel better.

And, I imagine, you know what it is to be suffering yourself, and how hollow some of our favorite consolations may sound, but how much the love and presence behind them means—how much it means to have someone stay with you, and bear witness with you, and for you.

“To witness,” theologian Shelley Rambo concludes from working with trauma survivors, “involves trying to grasp a sense of things in the darkness, attempting to move toward life without knowing its shape.”^[i] It is “the persistence of love in the midst of suffering.”^[ii]

This is what the women in our Gospel remind us today: to bear witness: To watch and wait and stay with Jesus, as he walks toward the cross, and to allow the darkness to disorient us, to complicate our narrative, to shake up our faith—in faith that it, too, will be made new.

And as we bear witness, with these women and with Jesus, may we watch and wait with one another, too. May we have the courage to not turn away from those who are suffering, or dying—or from those who have been condemned. May we persist in love, in the midst of suffering and sin—in this space between the triumph of Palm Sunday and the trauma of Jesus' passion and the resurrection that we hope for but haven't yet seen. May we bear witness.

^[i] Shelly Rambo, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (2010), 163.

^[ii] Serene Jones, quoted in Rambo, 159.