

**Palm Sunday B
Mark 14:1-15:47
April 8, 2009**

Where do you stand today? Where do you enter this drama, this story of the passion and death of one Jesus of Nazareth? Mark the evangelist opens the doors to this tale, this oh-so-familiar, yet oh-so-agonizing tale once again. He invites us to step inside, to immerse ourselves in the drama, to find ourselves in the gospel's gut-wrenching climax.

So on this Sunday of the Passion, what character captures your imagination? Where do you find yourself within this story? Whom do you stand beside as you watch Jesus eat, pray, and weep? Whom do you walk with as he is betrayed, arrested, tried, flogged and tortured? Where do you wait as he is led out to Skull Hill and hung up on a cross to suffocate?

Where do you stand?

Although the dramatic reading of the gospel that we just shared together identifies us with the religious authorities, the mob or the mockers at the end, I think there are many places for us to stand this morning. I believe each one of us can discover ourselves somewhere in this story, because if it does nothing else, the passion and death of Jesus of Nazareth shows us who we really are.

Our God is a man who died as an enemy of the state, as a heretic to his faith, as a railroaded victim of a corrupt system, as a friendless no-account, hung between two bandits. What does that mean to you and me today? Where do you stand in this story? What character embodies your own reactions as Jesus goes to his inevitable death?

Perhaps we stand with the disciples. Certainly that's where Mark would have us stand. All through his gospel, we are encouraged to identify with the disciples, to walk with Jesus, to wonder at his healings, to be the ones who get the parables explained to them, the ones who get to know him as no other human beings do.

So we sit with him at that last Passover meal, struggle and fail to stay awake with him in the garden, and watch in horror as the soldiers come, as Judas offers that swift, sarcastic kiss.

Do we stand with the disciples? If so, we had better get ready to run. Because as soon as the vigilante mob shows up with its swords and clubs, the disciples take off. Even Peter, faithful Peter, who goes all the way to the courtyard of the high priest ... even Peter can't stay true. Pressed by too many questions, he swears and curses and says he never knew him ... Jesus, his best friend ... he never knew him. And when he realizes what he has said, Peter breaks down and weeps. Then he disappears from Mark's gospel narrative, and he is not seen again.

"All of them deserted him and fled," Mark tells us. And can you blame them? It's hard to watch Jesus die. It's terrifying. So many of us would rather take a pass. What are we to do with a God who suffers? It's too hard. It asks too much from us. It's easier to run away and come back next week, when it's all over and the flowers and the songs and the alleluias of Easter make it all seem like just a bad dream.

So ... do we cut and run with the disciples?

Or do we stand with the religious authorities and with Pilate, ready to get this troublemaking Jew out of our sight? Not everyone is here this morning as a true believer, you know. Some have been dragged here by their parents, or by their spouse or partner, or have come out of a sense of civic or cultural duty. These are the folks among us who don't know, and don't really care either, if Jesus is the Messiah, or even if God actually exists. "Just get it over with," they're thinking. "It's a whole hour out of my life on a Sunday morning. Let's move it along."

And like those elders and chief priests and even Pilate himself, these folks find it easier to just dispose of Jesus than to actually deal with the questions he raises. So for those with no real interest in Jesus of Nazareth, perhaps this is the place to stand, with the authorities and with Pilate. We can just send Jesus expeditiously to his death, and then move on to something far more interesting ... brunch, or basketball, perhaps.

Or maybe we stand with the crowd, or the passers-by at the foot of the cross. Maybe we stand with those who want God to play by our rules, and to meet our needs. Maybe we stand with those who are frustrated by a world that never seems to play fair, a world that is chaotic and capricious. We ask: if God is all-powerful, if God is all-loving, then why doesn't God fix it all? If Jesus is God, then he should climb down off that cross and straighten out this sorry little world once and for all.

For too many of us, when God disappoints, when the world disappoints, we would rather call for Barabbas ... the insurrectionist, the rebel. We want a man of action who can fix things far better than a God of inaction ever could. And so we stand and demand God to do it differently, to do it better, to do it our way for a change. Not this way. Oh no. Not like this.

But maybe we stand with the women, today. They didn't run away. They're still there, Mary Magdalene and Salome, and that other Mary. Many other women are with them, too, the women who had followed Jesus, making sure his clothes got washed and his meals got served. They watch him die from a distance. Not too close. Not close enough to smell his sweat and hear his groans. But from a distance, where it wouldn't hurt so bad or cut so deep. Yes, maybe we can stand with them. At a distance, but not close enough to feel it.

Where do we stand today? Is it possible, is it at all possible for any of us to stand with that lone centurion, there at the very foot of the cross? He didn't ask to be there. He didn't have any investment in Jesus of Nazareth. He was just doing his job, standing there as the very embodiment of the powers of this world, the empire that would crush all opponents, the keeper of the peace.

But he was the one who saw it all, who heard it all. He heard the moans of the crucified men, the mocking of the bystanders. He watched as one by one, each dying man tried to raise his body up a bit, to catch a breath, to relieve the suffocating build-up of fluid in the lungs. He heard Jesus shout that great accusation to the heavens ... "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And he watched him breathe his last with one, loud, agonizing cry.

I don't think he saw the Temple veil torn in two. It wouldn't have meant anything to him, a Roman and a Gentile, anyway ... that the Holy of Holies was exposed for all to see, that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was not locked down in a box in the Temple any more.

But because he did not flee, or flinch, or demand another outcome, or hope for another ending, the centurion saw something else. In this man, abandoned by everyone yet faithful to the end, hanging there, dying there, the centurion saw what everyone else had missed.

"Truly this man was God's Son," he murmured.

So, where do you stand today, and where will you stand in the week ahead? Will you flee from here at the end of the service and return next Sunday when the coast is clear? Will you argue with the passive, passionate solution God offers us for our human predicament, and decide to reject it? Will you watch from a distance, so you won't get hurt?

Or can you bring yourself to enter the story, to walk all the way to the cross, to stand there on Good Friday, seeking the face of God in the one who dies there, for you and for me?

Where do you stand?