



SERMONS THAT WORK

Good Friday

The Rock and the Handmaiden

[RCL]: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

All week, we have grappled with our dual nature. It began on Palm Sunday. We started by shouting Hosanna to the Son of David and ended shouting for his crucifixion. It's bewildering and exhausting, being knocked from pillar to post, being confronted with our best selves and our worst selves, hardly knowing from one minute to the next who we will be. Are we Jesus' faithful disciples, pledging to be with him to the end and actually going through with it? Or are we his betrayers, selling him out to those who would kill him and running and hiding when the trial comes?

We face the dichotomy of our divided selves one more time today, on Good Friday. We are two people in this story. We are Peter, and we are Jesus' mother, Mary. We are the ones who deny him, and the ones who will not be kept away from him but stay with him until the bitter end. This is the price of sin, living a life divided, lost and broken since the Garden of Eden, unable to be whole people.

Peter is the most human of the disciples, and that is why we love him so. He is impulsive and loud to the point of being ridiculous and obnoxious, but he is also so passionate in his love for Jesus, on fire to be a good disciple. "Even if I have to die with you, Lord," he says, "I will never betray you." Peter says this and we say it too without thinking it through. It is a rash promise, a lightly made commitment that we say not as a promise to endure our own death but to prove to Jesus that we are appropriately emotionally demonstrative in front of him. No doubt Peter thinks he means it, but underneath that, he is trying to stand out in the crowd of the disciples.

But when the moment comes to live out our promises of loyalty, suddenly we do everything to make ourselves inconspicuous. Instead of loudly claiming our allegiance to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, we look around with Peter, hunch our shoulders a bit more, try to look ordinary and uninteresting, and say, "Who me? Jesus? Never heard of him." Or more likely in our day and time, "Well, I'm spiritual but not religious." Or, "Everyone knows it's rude to talk about religion or politics in public." Or when we meet a friend or a stranger, instead of saying, "What do you think about God?" we say, "Wow, this winter was awful. How was your March Madness bracket?"

Sometimes the denial can be as easy as simply not opening our mouths at all, not defending someone who is attacked, not speaking out when we see something unjust. Sometimes denying Jesus can mean not admitting that we have hard questions about our faith, that late at night, we wonder if we're the only ones who have doubts.

And no matter how it happens, eventually the cock crows. Somehow, in some way, we hear that dreaded sound, see Jesus look across the courtyard at us with hurt—but also with such tenderness and love in his eyes. And we go out and weep bitterly. We are all Peter.

There is someone else who weeps bitterly in this story, not because she has denied and betrayed Jesus, but because she is paying the price of having been the most faithful person to him on Earth: his mother, Mary. Mary has shown loyalty and love to Jesus since before he was born, since the day she said yes to the angel Gabriel.

In a very real way, she gave up her life for him before he gave up his life for her. She gave up her reputation and her respectability by getting pregnant out of wedlock and bearing the hostile stares and nasty comments of her community. She faced potentially not even being able to marry at all if Joseph didn't have enough trust in God to listen to his dreams. And for thirty long years, before Jesus set about his true work, she bore the knowledge every day that she had the responsibility for the safety and nurture of the Son of the Living God. This was in a day and age when she couldn't run her little boy over to the ER if he fell out of a tree and broke his arm, or was run over by a Roman chariot, crushed under its wheels, or succumbed to any one of a hundred fevers and plagues for which she had no medicine.

And now she must watch as he dies in front of her eyes. Did she feel like she had failed in her one task on Earth, to keep Jesus safe? She must have known there was nothing she could do to save or protect him, not against the full weight of both the religious and the Roman authorities. In fact, she was in grave danger herself. She could have been condemned and executed for blasphemy, for insisting her son was the Messiah. Or she could have been used as leverage against Jesus. They could have arrested and tortured her to try and control him.

But she didn't care. She offered herself freely as the handmaiden of the Lord thirty-three years ago, and she is still doggedly carrying out that promise today as she walks the streets of Jerusalem and climbs the hill to Golgotha to see her son crucified. We have elements of her courage and her faithfulness within us as well. We are here today, witnessing with our eyes and hearts fully open to the pain, the crucifixion of our beloved Jesus. The aching, weeping heart of devotion that impelled Mary to stand at the foot of the Cross and see her worst nightmare come to life, beats within us too. That's why we're gathered here today.

Some of us will find it harder to admit that we are Peter, so convicted of our own awesomeness that we continue to insist we'll never deny Jesus. Some of us will find it harder to admit that we are Mary, so convicted of our own sinfulness that we continue to insist we are terrible people who will never measure up to God's demands, who could never be vessels of grace to the world.

The truth is, we are both Peter and Mary, and we have to bring both of our warring selves to the foot of the Cross. This deep chasm within us, that divides what we want to do with what we actually do, that divides our impulses toward holiness from our impulses toward sin, that divides our darkness from our light—this is our divided self. This is the legacy of our fallen nature, what makes us as human beings broken creatures. In this war within, we hope and pray and strive and try to be faithful disciples, and we falter and fail and hurt ourselves and others over and over again.

We can never heal this chasm through our own effort. There is no self-help book, no trick of psychology or medicine or therapy—as helpful as those tools are—that can reach the sickness of our souls that is the root of our addictions, our greed, our selfishness and our blindness. We must bring our broken and hurting selves to the foot of the Cross today and surrender ourselves to Jesus’ healing grace. He takes on all of our sin, our pain, our lost and abandoned selves and treasures and cherishes us in the very midst of our mistakes and failures.

Does this mean that because we’ve come to church on Good Friday and offered our sin and pain to Jesus on the Cross, we’ll wake up on Easter Sunday freed of all our sinful impulses and unhealed pain? No. That’s why we come to church every Sunday, every Holy Week, every month, every year, every decade. The healing of our divided selves, the slow bringing-together of our sin and our glory, the bringing of our Peter and our Mary into harmony, happens one slow drop of Jesus’ blood on the Cross at a time, one first living breath of his in the tomb on Easter Day at a time. That is the Christian life. And it all starts here, at the foot of the Cross.

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