
At the Foot of the Cross

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A Sermon by the Reverend Canon Elizabeth C. Knowlton
Last Sunday after Pentecost, 29C
Luke 23:33-43

It had started out as a fun and festive Tuesday in December. The Cathedral staff was planning to go to Brio to celebrate the holidays. Baked goods had been filling the break room and I was humming as I walked down the hallway. I had just finished celebrating the 12:15 service and was on my way to the vesting room. As I headed towards my car, I noticed I had a message on my cell phone from my husband, Ron. I dialed the voice mail and waited to hear his voice come over the line.

"Beth, there's been an accident. Call me as soon as you get this." I felt my stomach lurch as I called him back, not knowing who was hurt or what had happened. My college-aged niece had been on her way with my sister-in-law to Athens, to do some work on the house she was going to move in to in the next few months. As they were getting ready to pull in to the intersection, another car had hit them, and Tiffany was in critical condition. What had started as a day full of promise and frivolity had quickly shifted to the foot of the cross.

We began our vigil in the ICU. Tiffany was unconscious and suffering from a traumatic brain injury, and it was touch and go. There were days in the coming weeks where we didn't even know what to pray for. We wanted her to live, but we didn't know what that would look like. Would she be able to have anything resembling a normal life? We prayed, and we waited. Christmas dinner that year was held in a hospital cafeteria.

The people from my niece's church were wonderful. They took shifts, brought food, and kept vigil with us. Gradually Tiffany became stabilized. The swelling began to subside and we started to believe she would make it. Eventually, she was transferred to the Shepherd center and began a long process of rehabilitation. I remember the day I talked to my sister-in-law and we started to hope that Tiffany would have a life. It was not the one she had expected, but she would be able to support herself. She would never have the same personality as before the accident, but she was with us. And we were grateful. Months later, it finally seemed safe to gather and open our Christmas presents. We were in a new place, but the ground had started to feel firm again. We had moved from the foot of the cross, to a place of resurrection.

This Sunday in the liturgical year is always a bit of a shock to me. We are in the midst of purchasing turkeys, making travel plans, and winding up another liturgical year. If we are particularly sensitive to the church calendar, we might be aware that Advent is around the corner. But, until seminary I'm not sure I ever paid attention to how the year might conclude. I certainly would not have imagined the gospel we hear this morning. How is it in the midst of holiday preparations that we find ourselves at the foot of the cross? How is it that we hear a criminal asking Jesus to remember him in the kingdom?

But while I find this jarring, it is only my own assumptions that make it a surprise. It is only my own attachment to the predictability of Good Friday that makes this shocking to encounter this part of our story here on this last Sunday in Pentecost. Yes, it is easier when we can prepare for our encounter with the cross. But if we are prepared, I wonder if it really is Good Friday?

Were the disciples prepared to see the one they had followed end his earthly life in humiliation? Was this what they had hoped for when they gathered for a Passover meal? I can only imagine that as they gathered at a distance from the cross that it felt as if their entire lives had turned upside down.

They of course had no way of knowing how things would turn out. If they had even heard Jesus' predictions of his passion, how could they have really trusted in something like resurrection? As they kept vigil at the tomb on Holy Saturday how could they have known? How could they have dared to believe? How can we when we find ourselves unexpectedly at the foot of the cross?

The temptation is to forget the rest of the story. To place ourselves in a linear point along with the disciples and succumb to their pre-resurrection despair, to only have the option of watching someone we love about to leave us. But when we find ourselves slipping into a place of hopelessness, this is often when the voice of someone reminds us of who we are. They remind us of the rest of the story. We do not come to the foot of the cross as Good Friday people. We arrive with the hope of resurrection.

This does not make the foot of the cross a desirable place. It does not make the foot of the cross a place that we naturally seek out. But few of us will be able to avoid it in our lifetimes. We will find ourselves there at some point. We will not get to choose the date and time, or the season of the year. So, if we are going to be there, it is important that the foot of the cross is a transformed place. It is place where darkness is not the final word, and even a criminal is given a word of comfort and assurance. It is a place that God is and that Jesus chose to be. It is a place where we can never be alone, no matter how alone we feel. Jesus is there and he promises to remember us.

In my vocation as a priest, I have the privilege of entering into spaces where people find themselves suddenly at the foot of the cross. They may have had a phone call with bad news. They may have learned of a betrayal so profound that their world view has been turned on its head. Their economic stability may have vanished into thin air. This might seem hard or even depressing. But it is not. Rather it is an invitation to holy ground. There is holiness at the foot of the cross. We are all called to go there and we are called to keep vigil with those that find themselves there. We are called to remind them that Jesus is there and that they are not alone.

We remind them just by being there. We do not have to have the perfect words, in fact often silence is our best response. We might be the one who brings a casserole, or lightens the mood in a waiting room by seeing a flash of humor in a dark place. It doesn't matter, as long as we are there--as long as we are bearing the hope and love of Jesus.

Several years after my niece's accident, I got something in the mail I could never have imagined that dark December afternoon. It was a graduation announcement for Tiffany's completion of her bachelor's degree from the University of Georgia. She is forever changed by her time at the foot of the cross, and so are we. But we all were transformed by our time there and we found ourselves mysteriously in the company of Jesus. We were not alone. We were remembered.

Amen