

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

April 22, 2011

Good Friday

Rev. Diana Hartman

Worship Theme: The In Between Time

John 18:1 – 19:42, Isaiah 53:1-6

Most of us here tonight have traveled many times along the path from the cross on Golgotha to the empty garden tomb. We are aware, even as we read tonight of the death of Jesus, that on Sunday we will proclaim that “He is risen.” As we sit here in the in-between place, between cross and resurrection we have the distinct advantage of looking backward but with knowledge of the future. As Paul Harvey would say, “We know the rest of the story.”

But for the first time traveler, Easter Saturday formed a frontier-barrier that obstructed all forward moving progress. For those first disciples of Jesus, looking back on the Friday crucifixion from the point of the first Easter Saturday must have been all but unbearable. For them this was not the first day of a three-day drama, but the last. For the first disciples this was not the beginning of the story, but the end.

I wonder if sometimes you and I don’t move a bit too quickly from the agony of the cross to the joy of the resurrection. What is it that we would see if we made the effort and mustered the courage to examine the cross of Jesus from the second-day vantage point, looking back without knowledge of the future?

Alas, like any dramatic account, it is no longer quite the same once the story has unfolded and the outcome revealed. Yet, by not stopping here for a time, have we ceased to hear the very narrative by which the church lives?

When we neglect to pause here at the tomb of Jesus and acknowledge that Jesus is lying dead in a criminal’s grave, rejected and humiliated; and his disciples are gathered in fear of their own lives and in utter hopelessness, do we not negate what the crucifixion and burial were and meant?

Of course, the story does move on—gloriously. And for the church today, the second day, the day after the crucifixion, has become for us a day of calm before the victorious storm. From sundown tonight until sundown tomorrow, it is a day of darkness before the glory of the triumphant Lord is revealed in earth-quaking, life-transforming splendor. It seems to me, after all, Christian faith is not that Jesus was crucified but that Christ crucified was raised and this throws a whole new light on what his death meant.

As the complexities of this story emerge, we the hearers hold in tension what the cross means to us, what the resurrection says to us and what each says in light of the other. Tonight, we move into the frontier wilderness, between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Events that are both separated and united by the intervening day of Easter Saturday.

Just for tonight, I invite you to try to put yourself in the place of the first disciples. Try to live through this event as one of those first disciples. Remember the story—

The sight is melancholy, terminal, and disastrous. The treachery of Judas betrays Jesus; you and I, his disciples, distance ourselves from him—first as we sleep while he prays in Gethsemane, then as we flee during his arrest.

The desperate people of power and influence accuse Jesus and the abusive guards take him away. Cowardly Peter denies Jesus, not once but three times, and the calculating Pilate sentences an innocent man to death. The violent soldiers humiliate, spit upon and mock him and the jeering crowd calls out, “crucify him, crucify him.” Although each of us claims innocence, all of us represent humanities collective accountability to the death of Jesus.

Jesus is left alone, isolated. (pause) “Despised and rejected” are the words of the Prophet Isaiah. Repudiated by the very people of God whose mission he sought to fulfill. Forsaken by us, his own disciples, those to whom he extended the invitation, “Follow me.”

This night, through our eyes as his first disciples, it is Jesus’ failure that dominates the scene and here he rests, dishonored and decaying “in a grave with the wicked.”

Our leader, our friend, our hope for the future—Jesus is dead and gone, convicted a sinner, a rebel, and a blasphemer. He has paid the price of tragic failure. He simply died, and his cause died with him.

For those of us who love him and knew him to be the Son of God, the tragedy goes beyond this despair to say that God’s son is dead. Admitting this moves us into a place of godlessness and hopelessness. In this place, as those first disciples, our fears overwhelm us and we believe that we very well may be the next person hung on a cross. For this is the end of Jesus, the end of God, the end of everything we believe in. And the words from Isaiah haunt us as we hear, “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken; struck down by God, and afflicted.”

Can any of us here today really know what those first disciples experienced? I believe we can and do.

In the death cry of Jesus of Nazareth, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” there resonates the ageless universal protest of human suffering. Victims of oppression, abuse, accident, tragedy, and disease echo this cry of the crucified, “Why, Why have you forsaken me?” as they plead for meaning in the midst of tragedy.

In many respects, American society lives in the Easter Saturday culture. Think about how modern history has left a wake of godlessness and despair. WWII, the Holocaust, Chernobyl. The post-modern era fairs no better as we struggle with the continued battles in the Middle East, suicide bombers, September 11, Afghanistan, Iraq, Darfur, youth in our streets spraying gun fire into a crowd of their peers, suicides, hate crimes and these are just a few of the Easter Saturday events.

At times, I fear that even the church of Christ has grossly betrayed its Lord and negated its own calling, becoming part of the Easter Saturday Culture. Through schism and division—splintered into rival communities, traditions, denominations on the basis of rival, competing authorities, confessions, liturgies, and social alliances—the disease of fragmentation grows like cancer in the body of Christ. And in the midst of such disabling disease in Christ’s own body, we hear the death cry of Jesus, “Why have you forsaken me?”

Perhaps, many of us, in even less global and more personal ways have also cried out, as Jesus did and as his disciples surely must have, “why?” Why cancer, why AIDS, why Alzheimer’s, why abuse, why violence, why mental illness, why infertility, why, why, why?”

As if this were not bad enough, we are bombarded with movies and books that lead us to believe that through a catastrophic war or some technological nuclear mishap where creation goes awry, our entire planet will be put to death. And so to shield ourselves from what must surely be inevitable, we build rooms underground or in our homes of mass construction to protect us from whatever evil may be lurking outside.

We live barricaded within the walls of our church buildings. We shut ourselves off from being loving and self-giving people. We live in isolated enclaves instead of community. We rush from place to place fearing a scarcity of time and resources. We live in an Easter Saturday culture.

When we come to this point of shaking our fists heavenward and asking, “why?” I believe we have come to the same place that the disciples find themselves—in that wilderness place between the cross and resurrection.

As they cowered in the Upper Room, they felt that God had forsaken them. Here in this place of hopelessness and despair is the place of the Easter Saturday Culture. We come to a place of relinquishing power and independence; we abandon the image of ourselves as self-made lords and acknowledge our total dependence on God, sighing finally, “It is finished.”

It is from this vantage point, the vantage point of Easter Saturday, the place where we relinquish our old selves that we are now able to receive the astonishing news, amazing, and totally unique news on Sunday morning, “He is risen!” For having suffered the agony of defeat and failure, of fear and despair, of hopelessness and godlessness, we can now understand the overwhelming joy of resurrection—a totally unnatural, nature defying event that marks the triumph of God’s love and the birth of the new creation.

This event is like no other. Never has a person before or since been resurrected from the dead never to die again. Evil and death did not triumph. God raised Jesus Christ from the grave. God has prevailed. God is sovereign. God’s word has not been silenced.

God's word continues to speak even today, through the community that has been called and that is able—able to the extent it answers God's invitation—to be a redemptive agent in our brokenness, as we the church, the resurrected body of Christ, continue proclaiming the good news that releases those who are captive to the darkness of despair, hopelessness, and God-forsakenness of Easter Saturday Culture.

As each of us became members of the church and the waters of baptism flowed over us, we died with Christ, we died to our old life of hopelessness and we were raised up out of the water into a new life in Christ. None of us goes through this alone, for Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord goes with us blazing a trail through this desolate wilderness of Easter Saturday and into Easter Sunday. Isaiah tells us, "We all like sheep have gone astray. We have all turned to our own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all...He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his stripes we are healed."

God *does* break through our Easter Saturday Culture, using the hands of the church, to rescue those stranded there. The body of Christ, crucified and risen, is called to continue to rescue those who live in the desolation of Easter Saturday by showing them how to traverse the boundary between the cross and resurrection and move into the *hopefulness* of Easter Sunday. And my friends this is not the job of pastors and a few elders and deacons only. I believe that it is the calling and vocation of every Christian disciple.

For we are told that "the church exists not for its own sake but for the world's sake, and not for some of the world but for the whole world." And it is by God's grace that we are loved, forgiven and redeemed and "by his stripes, we are healed." Amen.