

WHERE WERE & YOU?

A Meditation and Testimony for Good Friday 2023

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Where were you when you first sang “Were You There?” Were you so young that you do not honestly remember? Me too. Well then friend, what is your earliest memory of singing “Were You There” and feeling as if you were there?

I was fifteen. Our local United Methodist Church pastor and the neighboring Evangelical Covenant Church pastor were kindred spirits who did our youth ministry together, neither church could afford a youth worker in 1971. Also, in our school district not only were schools closed, but all businesses and the post office closed for three hours beginning at noon on Good Friday so everyone could attend services. But not everyone attended services. Therefore, Pastor Dale and Pastor Jack decided to combine their Good Friday services featuring youth as liturgists and musicians. They asked me to sing *Were You There?* as a solo. They must not have recognized that I am a better song leader than I am a soloist, but they never asked me to solo again after that day. Instead, they encouraged me to be a pastor.

So as their protégé I stood behind the pulpit of the Covenant Church with a very full sanctuary as my regular Sunday school hymn sing accompanist played a very tinny piano and sang *Were You There?* as a classic country soprano soloist. When first I sang chorus after the first verse, my voice began to tremble as it never had before. It wasn’t a vibrato; it was the moment I realized what people did to Christ. At the last verse, “Were you there when they laid him in the tomb,” I sang as if I were the daughter of Mary Magdalene’s daughters.

We who gather to worship on Good Friday are the descendants of the people who claimed Jesus’ body and gave him the dignity of a proper burial in a tomb even though he died the public crucifixion of man convicted of treason; a sign nailed over his head proclaiming the charge, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” So many people were there: the High Priest and members of the Sanhedrin who had filed the charge that led to his death sentence, Pilate who found him guilty, soldiers who whipped him and nailed him to his cross, onlookers who read the sign Pilate nailed

above his cross. There was also Mary, his mother, and John, his disciple, who helplessly watched it all unfold. Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the wife of Clopas, stood with them. And when he was dead, two of his followers, both Jewish men but not one of his twelve disciples, claimed his lifeless body and gave him a dignified Jewish burial. They were Joseph of Arimathea who owned the tomb, and Nicodemus who first came to Jesus at night.

These people are identified by John, the beloved disciple who stood with Mary while Jesus was on the cross. Where were you standing as you joined them while singing *Were You There?*

Is that where you still are as we sang those words again today? Age has moved me. Now, I stand more with another Mary, the one who was not only the wife of Clopas but also Jesus' aunt because she was his mother's sister. I still feel helpless to stop this horrible event from happening. I want to run to the sermon that will follow this Good Friday meditation on Resurrection Sunday morning, but I don't. I stand and feel the grief of my nephew dying because he threatened the power of both priests and governors when by both teaching and example he proclaimed that the greatest of all God's laws is to first love God and then love each other.

Today, I did not need to sing *Were You There?* to have this feeling of helplessness return, I only needed to turn on the morning news and where the sins of the powerful men and women were on full display once again. But as I watched, I knew I was not alone but surrounded by the Church Universal. And I remembered that we still have work ahead as we press on before we too join the risen Christ.

Amen.