

## Behold Your Son, Behold Your Mother

This morning, no doubt, you've come here to worship with a whole mix of feelings. If you were to list some of the things that are on your heart, what would you include? Love for God, the joy of being together in God's house, thankfulness, a sense of peace.... However, maybe you are also feeling some stress, or worry, or guilt... Doubts, or questions, or loneliness... Maybe you're weighed down by the winter weather, by concerns about a family member or friend, health issues, a problem at school or at work... A whole mix of feelings.

In the midst of all these feelings, today's scripture reading turns our attention to the cross. Today, we focus on the third time Jesus spoke from the cross. And the amazing thing is, we realize that Jesus is speaking to us—to us with all the turmoil of our lives.

Let's take a minute to picture the scene in our minds. In the center is Jesus, dying on the cross. On his left and on his right are the two criminals who were also condemned to die. To one side, there are the 4 Roman soldiers overseeing the crucifixion, so hardened to suffering that they gamble for Jesus' tunic as he dies. Then, there are 4 grieving women standing near the cross, women who have journeyed with Jesus & his disciples, helping in Jesus' ministry for the past 3 years. They are Mary, Jesus' mother; Salome who is Mary's sister and the mother of the disciples James & John; Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus healed when she was oppressed by 7 demons; and Mary, wife of Clopas—for her, all we have is her name; her story is unknown.

Of the 12 apostles, only one is there—no doubt, the others are in hiding, for fear that they will also be arrested & crucified as revolutionaries, as associates of Jesus. The gospel tells us that it is the disciple whom Jesus loved who stands with the women at the cross. Although he is

never named in the gospel, we can figure out this disciple is John, when we read from the very end of the gospel, chapter 21, verse 24: “This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true.” In other words, it was John, the author of the gospel, who was there at the cross.

Why doesn't he use his own name? Probably, because he wants to stay out of the limelight, to keep the focus on Jesus. The important thing about him is not his name, but that he received Jesus' redeeming love. And a second reason: like John, we are disciples whom Jesus loves. When we read that he was there at the cross, we see that there is a place for us at the cross—that all those whom Jesus loves belong there at the cross.

So, this is the scene on Good Friday. Can you imagine what it was like for Jesus' mother, Mary? She had no doubt followed with the crowd as the soldiers led Jesus out of the city, bruised and bleeding, too weak to carry the horizontal beam of the cross, so that Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry it for him... all the way to the hill of Calvary where Jesus was crucified. Then: Jesus' words, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” The taunting of the crowd, the religious leaders, the soldiers, even one of the criminals crucified alongside him. Jesus' promise to the other criminal—the one who had spoken up for Jesus: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

Mary stood near the cross. It was only about 9 feet high, so she could look directly into Jesus' eyes. She saw his suffering, and it broke her heart. She remembered how years ago, the angel Gabriel had appeared to her, to announce that she would give birth to the Son of God, the promised King. She thought of the night Jesus was born in the stable of Bethlehem, when

angels proclaimed that he was the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. King Herod had feared that he was a rival for his throne, and they had escaped to Egypt until it was safe to return home to Nazareth. There Jesus had grown up, helping his father in the carpenter's shop. Then, about 3 years ago, his cousin John had begun preaching in the Judean wilderness, calling people to turn from their sin and to be baptized in the Jordan River. After Jesus was baptized by John, he went into the wilderness, and fasted & prayed for 40 days, and was tempted by the devil.

Jesus returned to Nazareth with new purpose, and he began to call disciples and to teach the crowds: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the good news." (Mark 1:15) At first, Mary had not understood. What did Jesus' message mean? But she had seen the power of God at work as Jesus healed the sick and the demon-possessed, as he taught the crowds. And she had come to believe that he was indeed the promised king, the Messiah. Along with the 12 disciples and the small group of women who accompanied them, she too had traveled from town to town, assisting in Jesus' ministry. Along the way, she had seen so many come to faith; she was sure that Jesus would fulfill the promises of Scripture and establish God's kingdom on earth.

But now, her hopes were crushed, her faith shattered. Why had God allowed his Son to suffer on the cross? Why had God failed to inaugurate his kingdom? Within hours, Jesus would be dead. The powers of darkness would be victorious.

As Mary looked into Jesus' eyes, she thought she would see hopelessness & defeat, but she saw nothing like that, instead she saw something else entirely...

...she saw his love reflected there. And suddenly his words came back to her; words he had spoken just the night before at the Passover feast, as he taught his disciples in the Upper Room: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15: 12-13)... “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

Jesus was laying down his life for his friends... for all of them, for all the world... And in some way she didn't fully understand, this was how he would establish his kingdom, through his death, God's reign on earth would begin.

And then Jesus spoke... Mary strained to hear his words. He was speaking to her... speaking about John, his disciple who stood beside her, his arm wrapped protectively around her. “Dear woman, here is your son.” In those words, Mary sensed an outpouring of love such as she had never known. Jesus understood what she was going through... her pain, her grief, her confusion, her emptiness... He wanted to make sure that she was not alone, that she had someone she could lean on for support and strength in the days ahead.

Then, Jesus spoke again, this time to John: “Here is your mother.” And Mary got the message, deep in her heart. John, also, was suffering; John, also, was in need.

Jesus was giving her a responsibility to fulfill. As she had assisted Jesus in his ministry, now she was to assist John. They would be spiritual support for each other. She thought again of Jesus' words: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” For the rest of her life, she would strive to fulfill these words.

Now, 2,000 years later, we ponder Jesus' words from the cross: "Dear woman, here is your son." And then, "Here is your mother." These words are a call to action for us—a call to action in the midst of all the feelings we experience in life. We are summoned to take 3 actions: to stand at the cross, to stand with an arm around our shoulders, and to stand supporting one another.

First of all, like Mary, we stand at the cross. How important to take time to focus on Jesus' death, to realize that he suffered and died on the cross for you and me. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Jesus died so that our sins would be forgiven, so that our relationship with God would be restored, once more as children of our heavenly Father, and so that we would have a place in heaven when we die. Jesus offers us this gift. What do we need to do? Simply this: to accept his gift of grace, to ask him to forgive our sins, to put our trust in him as our Savior and our Lord, to learn to surrender all to him.

Secondly, Jesus calls us to stand with an arm around our shoulders. "Dear woman, here is your son." Jesus knows the things we struggle with. He knows our needs even before we ask. He sees the pain in our hearts, the burdens we carry. He sends someone to us to be a spiritual support, a true friend, to help build up our faith, to provide encouragement and wisdom. For Mary, that person was the disciple, John. Who is it for you? What helps you to open your heart to them? How could you get the most out of the time you talk together?

Thirdly, Jesus calls us to stand supporting one another. Remember how Jesus said to John, "Here is your mother." Even in her most difficult hour, Jesus gives Mary a powerful ministry,

to reach out to the disciple John with love & understanding, helping him through the struggles he will face. “This is my commandment, that you love one another.”

Like Mary, each one of us has someone in our life who especially needs our caring and support. Who might that be for you? Someone in your family? Someone at school? Or at work? Or here at church? Or in the community? Jesus commends this person into your care. Jesus is counting on you to reach out in love to them.

And so today, we’ve focused on the third time Jesus speaks from the cross—his words, a call to action. But before we can act, it’s essential to pray, to bring our needs before the throne of grace and to seek God’s guidance. And so, our worship service today will end with a time of prayer. We will remain seated as we join in a prayer song, “I Surrender All.”

Either during the song or after, you are invited to pray here at the altar rail (standing or kneeling). If you would like Pastor Diane & me to pray with you, come to this right side of the rail. Or, if you’d like to pray silently, come to the altar rail on the left, by the cross. If you want, feel free to remain in your seats to pray. Take as long as you need. Then, when you are ready, take your prayers out into the world.

Perhaps you’ll want to focus your prayers on one of 3 things: Prayers for others: like Mary, standing supporting one another. Or... prayers for ourselves: like Mary, standing with an arm around our shoulders. Or... prayers committing our life to Jesus as our Lord and Savior: like Mary, standing at the cross, receiving Jesus’ gift of forgiveness and eternal life.

Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” Amen.