

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Thursday, April 21, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

JOHN 19:25-27

25 Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," 27 and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

FOUR: AN EASTER STORY #3
FAITH TO THE VERY END

There is an old, somewhat haunting hymn of the church that we sing at this time of the year called, *Were You There*. Listen to these words from that hymn:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

Were you there when God raised him from the tomb?
Were you there when God raised him from the tomb?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when God raised him from the tomb?

The song, an old Negro Spiritual, is theologically profound, in that all of us were there when Christ was nailed to the cross. In a spiritual sense, it was our sin that put Christ on there. But, that is in the theological sense.

In the physical sense, there were very few people on planet earth that were there when Christ was crucified. There were the soldiers tasked with carrying forth the execution of the criminals. There were the curious onlookers who took some kind of perverse pleasure in watching the spectacle unfold. There were the religious leaders who had schemed with

each other to have Jesus arrested. And, there were a few of Christ's followers, only one of whom was a disciple. That disciple was John, the one who had faith to the very end.

A few years ago, Leith Anderson commented that there are 28 pages of Johnsons in the Minneapolis phone book. Pages 756-784 of the book are people with that name. He wrote, "[they are] named after the one disciple of Jesus who saw Easter with faith from start to finish. It is a good thing to be named after John and even better to be like him."¹

Our reading in Scripture of the Holy Week events typically begins with Palm Sunday. But I want us to go back to almost a year before the events of Palm Sunday.

It's interesting to note that very little of Jesus' public ministry happened in Jerusalem. Most of the major events happened around the Sea of Galilee, in the towns and villages that surrounded that locale. Capernaum, on the Sea, was Jesus' home base of operations. It's been called the adopted hometown of Jesus.

The Sea of Galilee is 68 miles away from Jerusalem. Nine months before going up for His last Passover in Jerusalem, Jesus was in the city for the Feast of Tabernacles. Many of Jerusalem's residents, and the Passover faithful who had come for Passover the year before were disappointed that Jesus hadn't shown up. You see, Jerusalem had become a dangerous place for Jesus to be. Those in authority hated Him. They didn't like the attention that He was getting, and they didn't like the tone that people were taking when talking about Jesus.

In John 7-8, Jesus' disciples cautioned him about going to Jerusalem, telling Him that if He must go, to go quickly. He would spend three months there; from the Feast of Tabernacles to the Feast of Dedication. These would be the last months that he would spend in Jerusalem before the events of Holy Week.

In order to understand the events that led up to the cross, we have to understand this last trip to Jerusalem. Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees escalated in John 8. The chapter begins with the religious leaders bringing Jesus the woman caught in adultery. He sees through their trap and ends up turning the tables on them and they leave looking like fools. It is in John 8 that Jesus talks about being the Light of the World. When questioned about His Father, Jesus said, "You do not know me or my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also."

Day after day Jesus taught in the temple courts. Day after day the authorities became even angrier with Jesus. In John 8:20 we can read between the lines and see the seething hearts of the religious leaders. "20 He spoke these words while teaching in the temple area near the place where the offerings were put. Yet no one seized him, because his time had not yet come."

¹ Taken from the sermon, *Easter With Faith*, preached at Wooddale Church, Eden Prairie, MN on the weekend of April 12-13, 2003 by Leith Anderson, p. 1.

When the Bible says that “no one seized Him, because His time had not yet come,” it means that God didn’t allow for it to happen. Remember, when Jesus died on the cross, it was because He offered His life up.

In John 8:42-59 we read Jesus’ final encounter with the Pharisees before he would leave Jerusalem for almost a year.

42 Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. 43 Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. 44 You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. 45 Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! 46 Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don’t you believe me? 47 He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.”

48 The Jews answered him, “Aren’t we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?”

49 “I am not possessed by a demon,” said Jesus, “but I honor my Father and you dishonor me. 50 I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. 51 I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”

52 At this the Jews exclaimed, “Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he will never taste death. 53 Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?”

54 Jesus replied, “If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. 55 Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word. 56 Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”

57 “You are not yet fifty years old,” the Jews said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!” 58 “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” 59 At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

Jesus had upset these men to the point that they were ready to stone Him. He would leave Jerusalem that day and not go back until Passover the next year.

When Jesus told His disciples that He was ready to go back to Jerusalem they must have been concerned. Passover brought over 2,000,000 men and women to the city. We have no idea how many showed up as Jesus rode into the city on the back of that donkey in John 12:12-19, but surely there were thousands. And, John was one of them.

Look at John 12:12-19.

12 The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. 13 They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed is the King of Israel!"

14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written,

15 "Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion;
see, your king is coming,
seated on a donkey's colt."

16 At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

17 Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. 18 Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. 19 So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

What a magnificent day! Maybe there was nothing to worry about after all! John and the other disciples must have thrilled. The streets of Jerusalem were packed. It was and is the dream of every Jew to spend Passover in the city. This was a year like no other. After all, Jesus was doing things that had been prophesied. He was teaching with authority. He was performing miracles. The stories were spreading like wildfire. Just six weeks prior, Lazarus had been raised from the dead. The crowds had heard the story. Surely, Jesus was the Messiah

The disciples were with Jesus on Palm Sunday. They were part of the celebration. They were shouting, "Hosanna!" with the crowd.

Did you know that Hosanna literally means, "Save?" Next weekend the world will be glued to the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. When William someday becomes King of England, the people will shout out, "God, save the King!" as they do now when they are in the presence of William's grandmother, Queen Elizabeth. That is essentially what the crowd was saying to Jesus. God, save the King! What a good day, indeed!

John, like many of us, had faith during the good times. There are some who say, "It's easy to have faith during the good times in life." And, maybe that's true. But sometimes when things are going really well we fail to see Christ. We fail to recognize our need for Him. John had faith during the good days, but he also had faith during the difficult times.

By the time Thursday came around, much had changed. The crowds who had worshipped Jesus on Palm Sunday were in a much different mood as the week went on. Perhaps they were upset that things hadn't gone the way that they had hoped. Perhaps they, like Judas, had become disillusioned with Jesus, who was not the type of Messiah that they were expecting. One of the translations of, "Hosanna!" is "Save us!" It could be that the crowds were asking Messiah to save them from the tyranny of Rome. Little did they know that Jesus was coming to save them from something much worse than Rome. He was coming to save them from the wrath of God against sin. He was coming to pay the price for their sin. By Thursday everything had changed.

John and the rest of the disciples spent the Thursday of Holy Week with Christ. In an Upper Room in Jerusalem, Jesus shared a meal with his disciples. He talked about betrayal and hinted at death. There were accusations that Peter, John's friend, would deny Christ. John sat next to Christ at that meal, and even had doubts of his own when Jesus announced that there was a betrayer in the group, wondering if he might be capable of such a thing.

After dinner, Jesus asked Peter, James and John to join Him in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. From there, everything spiraled out of control. The disciples slept, Jesus sweat blood, Judas betrayed, and the arrest of Christ happened. When the soldiers arrested Jesus, John didn't run away. He stayed close.

Look at John 18:15.

15 Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard.

John was that other disciple. Every time you see John mentioned in the Gospel that he wrote, it is indirectly. He always refers to himself in terms like "the disciple that Jesus loved," or "another disciple."

John was known to the high priest. This meant that everyone at Caiaphas' home knew who John was. He was able to walk right into the home, and in doing so placed himself in grave danger. John's faith in Jesus was so strong that he was willing to risk his life for Jesus.

What about you? Is your faith just a faith in the good times, or are you willing to trust God when the difficult times strike?

Leighton Ford shares a story in his book *Good News is for Sharing*, that demonstrates what it means to have faith in the difficult times of life. The story is about the forty martyrs of Sebaste. In fact, when I was a kid Tom Green wrote a song about this story, that made it one of my favorite stories about what it means to follow Christ no matter the cost. Ford writes, "These forty soldiers, all Christians, were members of the famed Twelfth Legion of Rome's imperial army. One day their captain told them Emperor Licinius had sent out an edict that all soldiers were to offer sacrifice to the pagan gods. These Christians replied, "You can have our armor and even our bodies, but our hearts' allegiance belongs to Jesus Christ."

It was midwinter of A.D. 320, and the captain had them marched onto a nearby frozen lake. He stripped them of their clothes and said they would either die or renounce Christ. Throughout the night these men huddled together singing their song, "Forty martyrs for Christ." One by one the temperature took its toll and they fell to the ice.

At last there was only one man left. He lost courage and stumbled to the shore, where he renounced Christ. The officer of the guards had been watching all this. Unknown to the others, he had secretly come to believe in Christ. When he saw this last man break rank, he walked out onto the ice, threw off his clothes, and confessed that he also was a Christian. When the sun rose the next morning, there were forty bodies of soldiers who had fought to the death for Christ."²

Like John, these soldiers had faith in the difficult times of life. They had faith even when that faith put them in danger. John moved from the danger of house of Caiaphas to the danger of Golgotha.

He was the only one of Jesus' twelve disciples that was at the cross. Peter made it as far as Caiaphas' home and went into hiding, ashamed at his denial that he even knew Christ. John was different. He was there. And, it's here that you see another side of John's faith. He saw being a disciple of Jesus as not just being a follower out of love, but out of duty. Jesus responded to that faithful heart in John 19:25-27.

25 Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," 27 and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Leith Anderson writes, "It was a dramatic moment. Jesus was dying and he knew it. The pain must have been indescribable. Every breath was precious and every word was almost impossible to speak. The whole point of Jesus' death was human salvation—he was dying there in our place; he was taking the eternal consequences of our sin; he was saving our souls from hell and for heaven. Nothing could be bigger and nothing could be more important.

² Leighton Ford, *Good News is for Sharing*, (Elgin, Illinois: David C. Cook Publishing Company, 1977), p. 16.

But Jesus had a personal, practical need. He was the eldest son of a widow. He needed someone to take care of her after he was gone. His own brothers weren't there; he couldn't count on them to do what needed to be done. So, he asked John.

The ancient historians tell us what happened in the following years as the gospel of Jesus started to spread across the empire and beyond—all the disciples of Jesus left to become missionaries except one. John stayed behind to care for Mary until she died. It was his duty.

Faith in Jesus calls some of us to special assignments. They may not be glamorous and they may not be easy. Jesus may ask us to do what no one else will show up to do. Others may do the spectacular and sensational. Others may have their names in the headlines. Others of us may be assigned to take care of the elderly. Our names may not even be mentioned—we are just "the other disciple" or "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

We learn from John that faith calls us to duty and our duty is to do whatever Jesus wants us to do."³

It must have been awful. John witnessed the jeers and the abuse. He saw his beloved Jesus hanging in agony on the cross. He felt Mary's heartache as she watched her son die on Calvary's tree. Jesus was dead. The disciples were scattered. It felt hopeless.

It wasn't that Jesus hadn't told them that He would die and that he would rise from the dead. And, it wasn't that they had never witnessed a resurrection. It was only six weeks before that Jesus rose Lazarus from the dead. But it's hard to believe when all the evidence points in another direction. Friday and Saturday dragged and then Easter changed everything.

Look at John 20:1-9.

1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. 2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7 as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. 8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

³ Anderson, pp. 3-4.

There is that description again. John was the “other disciple.” Mary’s story caused him to run. He ran with determination and hope, beating Peter to the tomb and he went inside. What he saw was strips of linen and a burial cloth that had been around the head of Jesus. It wasn’t much, but it was enough for him to believe. John believed in the Resurrection, and that belief would be verified in the days ahead as he saw and interacted with the risen Christ.

There is a great new book in our church library called, *John’s Story*, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins that helps bring to life the story of this man of God. We know that John lived longer than any of the other disciples, exiled on the Island of Patmos until his death well past the age of 90. John continued to be influenced by Jesus long after the Resurrection, leading the church at Ephesus and starting many churches in Asia Minor. This champion of the faith endured intense persecution and deep pain as a result of following Jesus. But, the joy he experienced in following Jesus made all the trials worth it, for when Jesus rose from the dead, everything changed. Hope came where there was hopelessness. Joy came where joy had ceased. Meaning came where the mundane had set in. Purpose came, and John’s faith grew.

This Easter may you have a faith that is strong in the good times and the bad! May you have a faith that is strong enough to move you to action! May you have faith in the Resurrection!

(Drama: “The Celebration” © 2003, Shelly Barsuhn, performed by Brandon Lerch)