

JOINT GOOD FRIDAY SERVICE

John 19:17-31

Were You There?

Were You There? I am not a fan of that hymn, because it says nothing about the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection, other than that it makes us tremble, tremble, tremble, but it does present an interesting question: were you there? Today I would like to contend that, while you may have not been there bodily in person, you were most certainly there. But let's look closely to see if that is the case. Let's see if you recognize yourself there. Let's see if you see yourself in any of the men and women put before our eyes.

Were you there? Have you been the distracted traveler on the road, too wrapped up in the muck of this life to notice the unambiguous love of Christ on display before you? Have you been the one too busy with the concerns of the world to notice the most important event and person in all of human history? Have you passed by Christ's Body and Blood offered for you in the Sacrament with little thought or gratitude? Have you closed your ears to His dying Words so filled with love and hope and promise because there were too many other voices, too many other faces to which to give your attention?

Were you there? Have you been the spectator, delighting in another's suffering, another's downfall, another's humiliation, waiting for the next train wreck to watch? Have you scoured the tabloids or the church narthex for the latest dirt on another?

Were you there? Have you been the mocker, quick to ridicule what you do not understand and scorn what you do not like? Have you joked about things that are anything but funny? Have you talked about God and His Son in a less than reverent manner, as if they were just one of the guys?

Were you there? Have you been the soldier, just doing His job, in the presence of the Living God yet just waiting for your service to be over? Have you merely put in your time with Christ?

Were you there? Have you been the Jewish leader, unimpressed with the Messiah God has sent you? Have you longed for a more exciting Jesus, a more hip Jesus, a more marketable Jesus, a less demanding or offensive Jesus? Have you wanted to tweak God's means and message a bit to make them more user-friendly or popular? Have you wanted a buffet Messiah, where you could pick and choose from His teachings and works, taking a lot of what you like and none of what doesn't suit your palate? Have you seen God's service, so filled with Jesus in Word and Sacrament, as anything less than heaven's feast on earth, a foretaste of things to come, the most exciting and marvelous of affairs. Or have you kept your nose in the hymnal and your heart in your pocket, singing the songs of Christ's death and resurrection with anything less than gusto, speaking the account of God's saving work through out history with anything less than conviction?

Were you there? Have you been the thief, mocking God in your suffering, rather than turning to Him? Have the times that should have brought you closest to your Savior been the times you have lashed out at Him most angrily? Has your stubbornness kept you from finding peace and your pride from forgiveness?

Were you there? Have you been Pilate, perplexed by this Jesus? Have you been convinced of His innocence but unwilling to openly proclaim it? Have you compromised the faith for momentary comfort? Have you placed temporary peace before the eternal health of souls? Have you treated truth like a changing wind? Have you viewed Jesus as One whom you accept or reject, acquit or condemn, rather than acknowledging that the opposite is true, that Jesus is the One who will judge you, that Jesus is the One who will measure your every thought, word, and deed.

Were you there? Have you been Judas, willing to betray your Lord but unwilling to return to Him for forgiveness? Have you doubted God's grace and mercy? Have you doubted He could love such a one as you? Have you thought that maybe all those promises were for other people?

Were you there? Have you been the apostles, frightened and unwilling to follow Jesus through suffering and death, uncomfortable with the thought of a crucified God and a theology of the cross? Have you wanted greener pastures, without all the struggle with the devil and the flesh into which we've been baptized? Have you wanted your heaven on the end of a wider, easier, more glorious road? Like Peter, have your mountaintop moments of faith been followed all too quickly by shameful valleys of fear and doubt? Have you made excuses for your faith and the Faith, as if it were anything less than God's revealed truth and love?

Were you there? Yes, you were there, crowing Him with your every wicked thought, spitting your every careless word upon His face, casting off His clothes as you have cast off His will and warning whenever you have decided that you or the world knew better how you should express your faith, your sexuality, your vocation, or your role in the family? You were there, bearing down on His mighty though feeble shoulders as He bore up under your sin. Most importantly, though, you were the nails, the object of His love, which held Him to His cross.

Yes, you were there, but I have forgotten an important part. You were the man upon the cross. He was your sin, and you are now His righteousness. He has come to be you to draw you into Himself. In spite of your apathy, in spite of your lack of backbone, in spite of your betrayal or your boredom, your dissatisfaction with His person and work, your disappointment in His Word, He has taken your place. The Father now hates Him to love you. The Father now forsakes Him to bless you. The Father now punishes Him to reward you. Satan now sinks his teeth into Him that his teeth might have no damning venom for you. Death now claims Him that it might have no claim on you. The grave now receives Him to return you. You are He because He has become you. His Body and Blood is now your Body and Blood, given to you in the Sacrament. His death and resurrection is now your death and resurrection in Baptism. His nakedness before God is now your most splendid clothing, a garment of righteousness and perfection, hiding all your shame, now exposed in Him. You have killed God, but God, through His death and according to His infinite love, has brought you to life.

No matter what you have been or who you have been up to this moment, Christ now tells you what you are in Him as He gasps in death: "*It is finished.*" You are His. He has bought you at an inestimable price. And what He has bought at so great a price He will not easily lose. You may have nicks and imperfections, you may not have done what He bought you to do, but you are His, and He who made you also knows how to restore you.

Were you there? Yes, you were there. Never forget, because it is only when we forget this truth that we can be anything less than enthralled by God's gifts of Word and Sacrament, anything less than resolute in our faith, anything less than selfless in our love for our neighbor, anything less than contented and enraptured with the person and work of our Savior. When the Jews complained about what Pilate had written on the placard on Christ's cross, he replied, "*What I have written, I have written.*" Now God says the same: What He has written, He has written. And now He has brought it to pass. He has kept His promise. You were there. This Christ is your Christ. This death is your death. The coming resurrection is your resurrection. Today Mercy invites you, Salvation knocks at your door, and Life recalls you to life (Leo the Great). Listen, watch, and, most importantly, believe. Amen.