Good Friday, April 15, 2022

Homily by the Rev. Kate Wilson

I am Joanna, wife of Chuza, the chief of staff for Herod. Slave, as is my husband. Disciple of Jesus. Listen, as I tell what I saw last night and today.

They arrested Jesus last night. I went to the yard at the Court. Peter was there, by a fire. They say Judas betrayed him. Does it matter? They shoved him from court to court, jeering at him. I heard the sounds of flesh battering flesh; curses and the mockery spat out by soldiers of the court. The lashing. Again! Again! Oh Jesus! Dear Jesus!

When I saw him again, he was bloody. Crowned with thick, long thorns, bruised. They mocked him as King of the Jews and shoved him to walk to Golgotha. Through the city streets! People hurried by or stopped to gape at him. I smelled the cooking smells from fires and ovens. Warm bread, fish, chicken. Normal, family smells. I smelled the sweat of the betrayers in the crowd and felt their spit as they called out against Jesus. Children who were frozen. Who didn’t understand what this even was. Innocents.

I held Mary his mother to keep her standing. At 48, she was exhausted and heartbroken and oh so powerless. Was it for this that she risked her own life, had accepted the possibility of being stoned by a mob for becoming the handmaid of the Lord? Was it for this that she had felt the pains of childbirth, had stolen to Egypt with Joseph to save her son’s life? The deaths of those innocents, back then, was fueled by the fear of Herod the Great just as Jesus’s life terrifies his son today and the Romans – the ever-so-powerful Romans.

Jesus stumbled. Of course he stumbled. His feet were bare and the cobble stones were hot and uneven. These streets were Jerusalem streets, not the flat broad highways the Romans built for their soldiers to conquer us. These streets are from long before the Romans. Today they are splattered with blood.

His cross was heavy, rough-hewed timbers, far heavier than needed to hold his weight. They were strong enough to support a roof. Even so, Jesus’s thoughts were directed to others. “Weep not for me, oh women of Jerusalem” he said. “Weep for yourselves.” Oh, and they did. Oh, and we did.

People came forward to help him. People with horror on their faces offering a simple cup of water. Soldiers forced them back brutally. Over a cup of water! Some fell, some were caught by others in the crowd. Strangers helping strangers. *Here! This is what Jesus taught us!* Some cried and held one another. A man from my village – a strong man, a metal worker and a builder – fainted into the crowd, bringing others down with him.

Jesus fell again and again to gasps and to jeers. The soldiers finally grabbed a man from the crowd to help Jesus. Now he need only hold up his own weight. Impossible enough.

At the summit, a hill filled with empty crosses that had been used over and over again to execute murderers, thieves, and innocents the Romans silenced. Golgotha is a place of painful justice and painful **in**justice, both, but a place that always ends in death.

Fear kills. Men of power – both Jews and Romans – thought Jesus would use his powers as they would have – to seize control, to rob and lord over us and to live royally. These hypocrites didn’t know Jesus. They didn’t want to know him. They just wanted him dead. Oh, Jesus! And now he hangs nailed to a cross. His burden of timber has become his executor.

How surreal it was to hear the life of Jerusalem carried on the air. Shouts from far away, shouts of friendship and bargaining. Laughter. Those sounds and wisps of the cooking fires carried on as if it was just another day in the huge, pulsing city. Did Jesus hear it? Should I speak to him?

What was there to stay? I whispered, “I love you, Jesus.” What can you say when you can change nothing, when you cannot alleviate such pain, when you cannot silence the mocking and laughter, when you watch, empty, at soldiers gambling for a bloody robe? So I repeated, “I love you, Jesus.” There was nothing more to say. I witnessed. I stood by his mother, by his beloved John, by Mary of Magdala. We witnessed. We abided. We stayed close while others hid themselves away.

It is finished, Jesus said. It is finished.

But it is not finished. Tomorrow, when the sabbath has ended and there is light enough to see our way, we will go to Jesus’s tomb to bury him properly, lovingly, finally. And then it will be finished. God give me strength.