

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11
MARK 14:1-15:47

Were you there?

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” It’s the opening line of one of my favorite hymns for Holy Week. In one version or another, we will sing it today, and to conclude the Maundy Thursday service, and to conclude the Good Friday ecumenical service.

The point of view of the hymn is from one believer in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord speaking to another. Because it is an African-American spiritual written generations ago, we also know it was written and first sung by people who were themselves not powerful, who in fact knew what it was like to have someone they knew be executed by a politician who was pressured by a mob, or even by a mob itself. Lynchings were all too common during the lifetime of the author of this hymn. Growing up in that environment made it painfully easy for the first singers of this spiritual to identify with Jesus in his suffering, and for them to know that he understood their suffering.

But, historically in the first century, there were, in fact, exactly *no* people in this Gospel story we just heard who truly believed in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, who was about to die for the sins of the world and who on Sunday would rise again from the dead. Even the handful of people who kept him company to the very end and buried him did so without expecting Easter.

So let us reflect together on this more awesome and poignant Gospel story with the question posed by this great hymn – but with the recognition that if we *had* actually been there it would not have been as a hero or heroine, because there were none – only the Savior. Sometimes when we fantasize about history and imagine ourselves – or picture our ancestors – at some historic moment we see ourselves or our ancestors only in the great and good roles. Let’s be honest and recognize that there is only one great and good role in the Passion Gospel – but that really is the point: Jesus suffered and died for the world because people needed his greatness and goodness in order to be saved.

Were we there? Perhaps we were there in the Upper Room, eating the Passover meal with Jesus, celebrating an annual religious ritual recalling the liberation of the Jews, but with the bittersweet reality of celebrating Passover in a Jerusalem occupied by the Roman Empire. Perhaps we were there among the dumbfounded followers of Jesus who heard him say that one of them would betray him – but did nothing to stop the betrayer.

Were we there? Perhaps we were there in the Garden of Gethsemane. Perhaps we were Peter, vehemently asserting that even if everyone else deserted Jesus, he would not. Perhaps we were one of those disciples who could not even stay awake one hour as Jesus prayed that night. Perhaps we were the one who drew a sword to defend the Prince of Peace.

Or perhaps we were in the eager, anxious, leering crowd sent by the chief priests, the scribes and the elders, “bravely” brandishing swords and clubs to arrest this man in the middle of the night in a lonely place who all week had been surrounded by crowds.

Or perhaps we were Judas, kissing the one we betrayed.

Maybe we were the young man who ran naked when someone in the crowd tried to grab him by his linen cloth to take him away with Jesus. Maybe we were all of his other followers with him who deserted him that moment.

Maybe we were there as members of the Sanhedrin, meeting in the middle of the night to try and approve an indictment of this dangerous rabble-rouser from the countryside. Maybe we were shocked as the rabble-rouser declared himself to be the Son of God. Maybe we spat on him and hit him in our anger. Maybe we were the temple guards who hit him as well.

Or, maybe we were the servant girl who recognized Peter, or a bystander who recognized Peter’s Galilean accent – which would have been enough to get him called for questioning by the police – or maybe we were Peter, saying three times, “I do not know Jesus.”

Maybe we were Peter’s tears.

Were we there?

Maybe we were the chief priests and the elders and scribes and the whole council who were convinced we had a horrendous blasphemer on our hands but who knew we had no power to execute someone. So we had to wake up our odious Roman governor, whose presence and power we resented, to try to convince Pontius Pilate that this man was a dangerous political prisoner who would try to foment a revolt against Rome.

Maybe we were Pontius Pilate, an experienced political hack with the unwelcome job of representing the Emperor in a perpetual political tinderbox, a region vulnerable to explosions due to these peoples’ confounded religion. Why couldn’t these people just shut up and concentrate on making money and enjoying the protection of the Roman Army instead of endlessly scheming against Rome and each other, we wonder. What is it *now*, crack of dawn in Friday morning, haven’t even had our coffee, yet these blasted religious leaders won’t even cross our threshold so they can continue to be ceremonially pure for their festival?

Who is this man, we wonder, who makes no answer to *us*, the eternal power of *Rome*? So we offer the crowd someone we *know* to be a murderer and a rebel, somebody Barabbas, and the crowd shouts to have him set free. Fine. We'll sign the death warrant for this Jesus person. Take him away, captain, and crucify him. Your men know their work well. *Now* can we have our coffee? Another day, more crucifixions.

Were we there?

Were we there in the crowd when Pilate asked *us* what *we* wanted to do with “The King of the Jews?” Maybe we were. Maybe we were those who shouted “Crucify him, crucify him.”

Maybe we were the soldiers who whipped Jesus with those whips with little pieces of metal and of glass on them. Maybe we mocked him and jammed the crown of thorns down on his head.

But then, maybe we were Simon of Cyrene. He was from Libya, in North Africa, a guy who just happened to be walking into the city when Jesus and the soldiers were walking out. Jesus, in his bloodied state, was no longer able to carry his cross, as prisoners were required to do, so the Roman soldiers just picked someone out of the crowd and said, “You’re comin’ with us.”

Mark’s Gospel *identifies* Simon as “the father of Alexander and Rufus” – as though the first readers of his Gospel would have said, “Oh, yeah, we know them.” Do you suppose? What a way to meet Jesus – carrying his cross.

Maybe we were the bystander at Golgotha who “ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink” – perhaps as an anesthetic, some small, hopeless kindness. Or maybe we were the bandits who were crucified on either side of him – or the scoffers, who dared him to come down from the cross “so that they might believe.” But had he done so, their – our – sins would not have been atoned for.

Maybe we were the centurion, the Roman captain in charge of the executions who somehow said, “Truly, this man was God’s Son.” Or maybe we were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome, who could do nothing but courageously be there, and weep, powerless to help as they had helped for so long. Maybe we were Joseph of Arimathea, a prosperous, respected man who had the guts to go to Pontius Pilate and arrange for a swift, decent burial. Did he ever come back to see what happened next?

Were we there? Oh, we were there alright: our worst selves were there and our best selves were there. Our best selves were not good or powerful enough to overcome our worst selves, but our worst selves were not powerful enough to overcome God’s paradoxical plan of total victory through total, self-giving love, suffering and death.

Were we there? Yes, we were. And Christ was there, knowing us and all people thoroughly, **being our hope** even and especially in humanity's darkest hour. Because Christ was there, forgiving and loving, experiencing the fullness of spiritual desolation, emotional loss and physical pain at the limits of human endurance, we and all people have a chance for **life**, life in its fullness, now and forever.

“Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”

(The Rev.) Francis A. Hubbard

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
Monmouth Junction, NJ