

Spend any time in the Holy Land and you will learn that pilgrimage there is all about proximity. How close can you get to the site where whatever the thing was that happened happened? People have for centuries spent lifetimes trying to verify the real rock of Golgotha, the true path Christ took down from Bethany, the actual empty tomb. Pilgrims queue up for hours just to spend a few seconds touching the floor in the crypt at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem or pressing their foreheads into the stone beneath the Altar of the Crucifixion in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. If someone somewhere has said with some certainty that Christ was in this place – healing or teaching or multiplying loaves and fishes – then people from all over the world will clamor to get as close to that place as they physically can.

How odd it is, then, for us to hear the last sentence of Luke's Passion today. How strange to end the story of the crucifixion on this bleak note, that Christ's acquaintances, including the women who

had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things. For all of the artists who have depicted a crowd of faithful followers gathered right at the foot of the cross – Mary with head bowed, Mary Magdalene with streaming red hair, John looking up with woeful eyes – the story today seems to be that even those disciples who didn't bolt and run, even those who didn't betray Jesus three times, even those who hadn't hidden themselves away trembling in some dark corner, even those who stayed didn't dare to get too close. There was Christ, hanging and dying upon a cross, and his followers kept a safe distance.

I say a safe distance because surely they felt themselves to be in danger. If Pilate and Herod, these newly-minted chums, had successfully captured Christ, then it stands to reason that Peter and John and Mary and Mary were next. That some of them stood close enough to see anything, that some of them were willing to make themselves public at all, was a testimony of true courage. Even

standing afar off, they were exposed and vulnerable. Standing at a distance was as close as they could get.

In the coming week, you and I will have many opportunities to come very close to the cross. We will have the chance to sit and watch wakeful in the garden on Maundy Thursday, to be present with Christ in the moments before his arrest in a way his disciples could not. We will hear the Passion again on Good Friday and be invited to come as close to the cross as we can, to kneel before it and even to touch the hard wood with our lips. For many of us, Holy Week is all about proximity to the events of Christ's arrest, trial, abuse, crucifixion, and death. We will queue up to get close, to place ourselves as near to the events of this week as we can.

We can do this without fear, we say. We can do this because we know something that the disciples did not, that the cross is not a defeat but a triumph, not an end but a beginning. We can do this, too, because we are blessed to live in a world and in a society where

to place ourselves at the foot of the cross poses no threat. There is no one persecuting Christians in Edgewater this week, we pray, and so we can plant our feet right where the cross meets the earth, reaching up to feel the scratch of the wood on our palms, watching the face of our Lord as he forgives and heals, suffers, and dies.

But let us not be deceived in this. There is nothing safe about coming close to the cross. There is nothing safe about closing the distance between ourselves and this singular moment in human history. For come close to this cross and you will find yourself forever changed. Come close to this cross and you make yourself vulnerable to the earth-shattering, searing love of God. Come close to this cross and you will suddenly find your soul exposed, your heart laid bare before the compassionate eyes of Christ, who sees all that you are and all that you could be. Come close to this cross and you will be forgiven, the burden of your bad choices lifted from your heart, the shackles of your sin shattered and cast to the ground. Come close to

this cross and you will be healed, the broken things inside you mended and made stronger, tumult turned to peace, dying turned to life. Come close to this cross and you will find your whole world turned upside down, find strength in weakness, power in compassion, the last made first and the first made last. Come close to this cross and nothing will ever be the same.

Spend any time in Holy Week and you will quickly learn that to be a pilgrim here is all about proximity. My friends, this week, get as close as you can to the place where the most important thing that has ever happened happened. Christ hangs there, his arms outstretched and beckoning to the whole world, beckoning to you. Come close to the cross.

*Preached by Mother Erika Takacs*

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