

ST. FRANCIS EPISCOPAL CHURCH
GOOD FRIDAY, 2009

Good Friday, 2009

John 18:1-19:42

The Reverend Faith Bledsoe

They increased the guard for the crucifixions today; pulled me off the East Gate because they were afraid the crowds would get out of control. I was on the gate the day that guy Jesus came into the city. I knew there was something odd about him the way the crowd treated him that day, throwing their cloaks and those branches on the ground. And now here I am standing between him and that same crowd.

They lined the road as he carried the crossbeam; only this time they threw rocks and rotten fruit. They spit into his face when they could get close enough. There was no longer the sense of adoration that accompanied his entrance into the city.

He fell several times, once right in front of me. I leaned over to help him up and wondered if he would remember seeing me at the East gate. Truthfully, I haven't been able to get his eyes out of my mind since that day at the gate. Those same dark eyes looked at me. His face was dirty, colored with bruising and blood. His lip was split and bleeding and his nose broken from the fall. But the eyes were the same – dark, soft, penetrating. He tried to speak, but his mouth was parched and the other guards were pushing him forward. He resisted for a moment, looking at me, then he moved on with heavy, faltering steps.

Apparently his followers really thought he was the Messiah – something about the one who will save Israel. He didn't look like someone to tackle the empire the other day and now that surely isn't going to happen! He apparently came into the city with his group and his talking riled up the Jewish authorities, especially Caiaphas and that bunch. They're all in cahoots with Pilate and so had Jesus charged with sedition and arrested. And now here he is about to die.

He's finally made it. Those other two thieves are right behind him. This is the part I can't stand – the nailing. It's not the nailing really as much as the screaming. It's better when they faint from the pain. That Jesus is already so weak from the flogging that this shouldn't take long. Well, how do you like that, even the Messiah screams.

It's not the nailing that kills them you know; it's the suffocation. The only way they can take a real breath is to push against the nails. Their muscles slowly fatigue until their lungs eventually can't take in enough air because of the weight of their bodies. This can take a few minutes or several hours depending on the strength of the man.

Most everyone is leaving now. There are still some folks standing at a distance. Then there are a few, mostly women and it looks like one man, all who seem to know him well, who are standing closer. It looks like one of them might be his mother the way she acts and the others act toward her. Jesus is looking at them. He's actually trying to talk. What a struggle that must be. He must have given the man his mother because he has taken her in his arms. Wow, I wonder what that's like – to give away the last thing you have.

I wonder what he's thinking now. Is it all over? Has it all been for nothing? Where is the God he talks about; the one who supposedly loves the whole world and is present in all things? Where is your God now? Surely such a God is not present here – not in this place of death.

Those eyes have found me again, as though he has heard my thoughts. "Cornelius, it is into God's hands that I surrender my life of this world." Did you hear that? Someone's playing a trick on me. Who said that?

"Look at me Cornelius. I am the one who calls to you in the dark night. Yes, I know your nightmares, the terrors of your sleep. I am the voice of your heart. Lay aside the life you hate or live there forever. Live the life of your heart and follow me into paradise."

Follow you! Why would I want to follow you! You wound up dying on a cross! "And you are already on a cross. The question is will you continue to hang there, struggling for power to survive, or will you surrender to death and live fully the life God calls you to? It is the choice we all have. You see that I have chosen surrender. Not just for me, but so that you will know what's possible. Be still in your nightmares, Cornelius, for in the stillness you will hear the voice of God. Obey the voice of your heart, Cornelius, even to death...and live."

And in that moment, Jesus took a last breath and his head fell.

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