

Title: Were You There?

Date: 4/7/2023 (Good Friday)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 7pm Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#); [Philippians 2:5-11](#); [John 18:1-19:42](#); [Psalm 22:1-11](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/BA5uOqt9x9Y?t=1931>

Twice I, Lord Jesus,  
it was I who denied thee;  
I crucified thee.

Back in 2016, I found myself in Washington DC at the same time as Michael Curry, our presiding bishop. Before the rest of the world would come to know him as the preacher at the royal wedding of Meghan and Harry, he was known in Episcopal Church circles for three things:

for his dynamic preaching;  
for calling us the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement;  
and...for appearing in people's selfies.

I do not have a Bishop Curry selfie, but I do have pictures of me shaking hands with him. I happened to be on the east coast, visiting seminaries, and a friend told me that the presiding bishop was in town. She asked if I would like to go with her to hear him preach. Of course, my answer was yes.

Those pictures popped up in my Facebook memories this week. Alongside those pictures was this powerful statement from Bishop Curry's sermon, "There are two ways of killing Jesus. One is to crucify him, and the other is to worship him and do nothing."

There are two ways of killing Jesus. One is to crucify him, and the other is to worship him and do nothing.

Years before Bishop Curry preached these words, the Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, regarded by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as the greatest preacher of this century, had said, "The world has two ways of getting rid of Jesus. The first is by crucifying him; the second is by worshipping him without following him."

As we read the Passion from the gospel according to John, we can start to compile a list of the people who actively worked to get rid of Jesus by crucifying him.

- First, Judas.
- Then soldiers, their officer, and the guards that came to the garden.
- The high priests, Annas and Caiphas
- Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea.
- The soldiers who physically crucified Jesus
- The Judeans, Judean leaders, and chief priests.

Historically, Good Friday is a dangerous day for Jewish communities in Christian contexts. Those who proposed the translation we read today point out that repetition of

the phrase “the Jews” in passages like this has given rise to anti-Jewish language and violence.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to remember that Jesus would have considered himself a Jew and that most of his early followers were Jews. Yet there is this long history of Christians committing violence against Jewish people, including crusades and caricatures and conspiracy theories and shootings at synagogues, and despite persistent deniers, the Holocaust.

If this is our takeaway from the Good Friday services, it feels like something has gone terribly, horrifically wrong.

So, is there someone else to blame? Maybe the blame should fall on the politicians and the high priests. Maybe Annas, Caiphas and Pilate could have found a way to work things out. Maybe the momentum of the crowd would have died down if they had waited just a little bit longer.

Some people even blame God. They talk about how Jesus was destined to die for our sins, as if this was a done deal as soon as Adam and Eve stepped outside the Garden of Eden, as if the only reason Jesus was born was to satisfy the bloodthirsty demands of an angry god.

If the question on our mind today is “Who killed Jesus?”, there is a lot of blame to go around. But is that the point? When we read the Passion with the intention of assigning blame or to take our revenge on those who crucified our Lord, it feels like we’ve missed something important.

Let’s look at the Passion again.

-With the exception of Simon Peter and the beloved disciple, the disciples were silent in the garden. They didn’t follow Jesus as he was led to Annas the high priest. They didn’t make an appearance at Pilate’s headquarters. They weren’t standing near the cross.

-If we look beyond this narrative, there are all those people who showed up in the other parts of the gospel that didn’t show up and say or do anything in these last days:

- Everyone Jesus taught and ate with.
- Everyone Jesus healed.
- Everyone in the crowd that shouted “Hosanna!”, which means “Save me!”, as Jesus entered Jerusalem.

Did their lack of action result in the crucifixion?

If only they had surrounded him so the soldiers and guards couldn’t even reach him. Perhaps they could have lobbied Pilate or found a way to put some pressure on Annas or Caiphas. Maybe they could have testified on his behalf or organized a counter rally at Golgatha.

Perhaps...maybe...if only...

When we ask, “What could they have done to save Jesus?”, it turns out that hindsight and modern-day organizing principles can offer many insights. But it’s hard to know what the result would have been in **that** time and place. Moreover, it’s done. It is finished. We can’t turn back time. We can’t save Jesus.

Most importantly, Jesus doesn’t need **us** to save **him**!

First of all, Jesus came to save **us**. Though he was in the form of God, he emptied himself so that he could share our human nature, so that he could live and die as one of us and reconcile us to God.

Second, it’s not possible to crucify him again. That was a specific event that happened at a specific place and moment in human history.

Third, he has already ascended into heaven to be at the right hand of the Father.

So, did Bishop Curry and Rev. Fosdick get it wrong? What did they mean when they talked about killing Jesus, about getting rid of him?

When Jesus was lifted high on the cross, he focused all eyes on him. Not just the eyes of those who were in Jerusalem at that time, but the eyes of everyone who has encountered his story since then. As we look at the cross, at the kind of death he died, he directs our attention to the political and religious conditions that led to his crucifixion. That same kind of political and religious maneuvering, that same kind of political and religious priorities, continue to kill people today. His death makes visible the destructive power of sin and evil and the paralyzing power of fear and hopelessness.

We were not there when they crucified our Lord. We were not there when they nailed him to the tree. We were not there when they pierced him in the side. We were not there when they laid him in the tomb.

Yet right here, right now, people are dying deaths like his. And when we worship him and do nothing, we allow black folks and brown folks and transfolx to be very publicly crucified on our streets and in our legislatures. When we worship him and do not follow him, we allow our students and teachers and administrators to be nailed to the tree by bullets in classrooms and hallways. We pierce the sides of those who are struggling to make do by criticizing their life choices and removing their safety nets. We push women into the tomb by taking away their choices and their voices.

If we worship him and do nothing about the conditions that killed him and continue to kill others, we have killed him again by ignoring what he came to show us. If we worship him without following him in loving and spending time with the most vulnerable and outcast among us, it is as if we have gotten rid of all traces of his influence on this world.

So, today, we sit at the foot of the cross. We tremble, we mourn, we grieve. As we reflect on the Passion, let’s stop wondering what other people could have done back then, back

when Jesus was being crucified. Let's start asking ourselves what we can do and who we can walk with, right here, right now.

Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.diocesemo.org/uploads/images/good-friday-proposed-trial-use-liturgy\\_926.pdf](https://www.diocesemo.org/uploads/images/good-friday-proposed-trial-use-liturgy_926.pdf)