

**Reflection preached by Lee Barstow on Good Friday, April 14, 2006  
Grace Church  
Amherst, Massachusetts**

Offered as the last of seven reflections on "encounters" in Matthew:

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Encountering Judas	Matthew 27:1-10
Encountering the Soldiers	Matthew 27:11-31
Encountering Simon of Cyrene	Matthew 27:32-37
Encountering the Thieves	Matthew 27:38-44
Encountering the Darkness	Matthew 27:45-54
Encountering the Women	Matthew 27:55-61

**Matthew 27:55-61**

<sup>55</sup>Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. <sup>56</sup>Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

<sup>57</sup>When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. <sup>58</sup>He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. <sup>59</sup>So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth <sup>60</sup>and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. <sup>61</sup>Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

**Encountering the Women**

And so we have come to the bitter end. The awful drama is finished, and we are left by Matthew in an empty and silent scene.

Joseph of Arimathea has lovingly put Jesus' body to rest and now has left. The leering crowds have departed to find other entertainment. The centurions are gone. Gone too are the male disciples -- we have had no word of them since Peter wept at the cock's crow and Judas hanged himself.

Who we *have* seen here at the end are the many women who had come from Galilee with Jesus, who stayed with him until the end. It is *their* faith -- the faith that gives these women their staying power -- that we are here to consider in this encounter.

By the last sentence of all today's encounters, even these women are gone, all except two: Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who may be the mother of Jesus, we don't know.

*Just these two*, remaining after all the others have gone, *alone together* in this darkest night of the soul, *staying* in the darkness and thereby *present* to encounter the approaching miracle. It is *their* faith that we now consider,

because it re-minds us that God is *always* with us, finding us when we can no longer find him.

As for the other followers, we can only imagine their suffering since the encounter in Gethsemane. What self-hatred must Peter be feeling. For all of them, what crushing guilt. An utter loss of identity. A grieving to one's bones. We can imagine the chaos – the running to find each other, the hurried updates of news about the others, the arguments about what to do, where to go, how to *survive*.

And yet Matthew gives us none of this. He has Joseph roll the stone to close the tomb, and then he tells us nothing of what is happening to Jesus' followers. Not that night, nor the following day, nor the following night – a period which must have been 32 *hours* give or take. Nothing, except, that is, for one little sentence. It is all we have for that entire interval, and perhaps we can find power in its simplicity: "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb."

With those 12 words, Matthew gives us a diamond-like image of faith: within the utter darkness and the pressure of that night, with no evidence to support hope of any sort, and with every reason to believe God has abandoned them in the most horrifying way possible, *these women stay*, and so they allow God to form their faith. Whatever their minds may tell them is the awful truth, they wait for *God* to reveal *His* truth. They *sit*.

It is a pivotal act of faith for them, as it *always* is for *all* of us when we find ourselves in our valleys of shadows. Because it is only when everything is taken from us, when not one glimmer of hope pierces the darkness, that we experience true poverty of spirit. *Now* nothing takes the place of our experience of God. *Now* we are blessed.

It is *like* this when we mourn. When a loved one dies, anything reminding us of ordinary life seems like an insult. It is the end. It is impossible that the sunrise will ever contain beauty again. And yet, because God is more than we can possibly imagine, we *are* comforted.

This is how addicts find their way out of their downward spiral, when all has been lost to their addiction. The Twelve Steps help them *cultivate* the understanding that they have lost all hope, and to know that only in their powerlessness can God do what they cannot. Every day in our church basements, they comfort each other with the knowledge of what is true for all of us: *we cannot save ourselves*, but there is One who has all power, and that One is God.

It is like this for us when we have lost our job and face an impossible financial situation. Or our marriage has ended and we can't imagine we will ever feel loved again.

Or we have betrayed a loved one. Or we live in physical pain. Or we're living through *our* last days on earth.

It is like this *right now* for Katrina survivors, and for those who would help them. And for the families of our soldiers in the Middle East. And for the families of terrorists. And for the soldiers and, yes, even for the terrorists.

All of us today experience despair in *these* days of terrible darkness. Our hopes for the world are flooded by the suffering of war and starvation and worldwide destruction, and all the other travesties of our day. How possibly can this downward plunge be slowed, much less tuned around? But even now, in the depths of *this* darkness, when we cannot imagine the possibility of salvation, *God is still here*.

We are the people of the Story, and *this* is our story, as it has been from the earliest days.

Sarah was hopeless... and then Isaac came. Naomi faced a hopeless future Moab... and then God saved her through Ruth.

There was no hope for the people of Moses in *their* desert... and then it was out of *their* darkness that the nation of *Israel* emerged. *That* is where they found themselves in God.

And this is how it is for the Marys, who sit in their faith and their pain through the longest of all nights, and another day, and yet another night.

Then, in the *next* dawn, as Jesus had promised, comes the encounter that proves the rule.

But that is the next part of our story. Today, we are with Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and we are opposite the closed tomb of Jesus who is our life and whom we have lost. We are sitting, and we are mourning, and we are praying with our whole soul to know that God is with us even now, and that he will reveal Himself in *His* time.

May it be so for each and every one of us.

Amen.

### **Prayer following**

Gracious God and consoler of all who mourn, comfort us. As we gather at the foot of the Cross today, give us renewed trust and love. Help us keep to our faith in the darkness of death, even before you turn it into the brightness of new life. Teach us that in our darkest hour, your Divine light is undimmed. Re-mind us and help us re-member... there is no end of your presence, there is no limit to your love.

We thank you for your unimaginable sacrifice in Jesus, who suffered that we might know these things, and we affirm we are yours, now and forever.

Amen.

**Draft program**

OPENING WORDS & GREETING

OPENING HYMN: WERE YOU THERE? #172

COLLECT FOR GOOD FRIDAY

I.

Encountering Judas	Matthew 27:1-10	Rudy/Emmanuel
Reflection		
Hymn		
Prayer		
Silence		

II.

Encountering the Soldiers	Matthew 27:11-31	Deene (replaced by Shawn)
Reflection		
Hymn		
Prayer		
Silence		

III.

Encountering Simon of Cyrene	Matthew 27:32-37	Peg or Tally
Reflection		
Hymn		
Prayer		
Silence		

IV

Encountering the Thieves	Matthew 27:38-44	Leah
Reflection		
Hymn		
Prayer		
Silence		

V

Encountering the Darkness	Matthew 27:45-54	Lyle
Reflection		
Hymn		
Prayer		
Silence		

VI

Encountering the Women	Matthew 27:55-61	Lee
Reflection		
Hymn		
Prayer		
Silence		