

Just Looking

Friday, April 15, 2022 • The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

Rev. Patrick C. Ward

John 18:1-19:37

They will look on the one they have pierced...

In the name of our crucified Lord. AMEN.

Was there a crown of thorns? What actually did the two on either side of him say to each other? Did Pilate's wife have a dream? And did Pilate literally wash his hands of the whole matter?

Of course, the four accounts we have of this awful morning and noon don't always square. But in the telling of his trial, of his being paraded out to Golgotha like wounded circus animal, of his crucifixion and death, the four to me seem to overlap as they don't anywhere else.

Their breakneck narrative pace slows. The mind's eye lingers cinematically on any number of details. The wording of a sign. A branch of hyssop. The construction of an undergarment.

It's been suggested that these hours, in fact, are where our gospels began. With eyewitnesses, at first furtively, walking the route. Telling the story. *That's* the stone bench. They took him *this way*. *Here* is where Simon of Cyrene was stopped. The crosses were *here* and *here* and *here*. I was standing *there*. It

seems to me that in Jerusalem, some version this story has probably been told on most days since that first day.

The birth stories differ. The healing and feeding stories differ. The resurrection accounts differ widely and gloriously. But these Good Friday hours live forever in a kind of sharp focus. Were *you* there? No. Neither was I. But some of the gospels tells us of women, standing at a distance. Watching these things. John has us nearer to the foot of the cross: His mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, Mary Magdalene, and this anonymous other disciple whom he loved.

“The man who saw it has given testimony.”

“They will look on the one they have pierced.”

In these accounts, In every painted rendering of this scene I can remember, this is what these faithful Jews are doing: standing still and looking. Just looking. Like Russian peace advocates who of late have been standing on Moscow street corners with blank posters, these family and friends and followers are pinioned by a police state. They are, in the moment, mute. And perhaps because they are mute some of them have a heightened capacity for intake, for impression. That's why their account of these hours, or some something close to their account, is so vivid and is now ours.

We were not there. Just as we were not in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, the day George Floyd was murdered. Just as we were not in Mariupol on the first and second of last month while Russian artillery shelled residential neighborhood for 15 hours.

“What is truth” Pilate asks Jesus on this morning inside Roman Headquarters. Jesus doesn’t answer. But perhaps the gospel itself embodies one possible answer.

Often truth is what is revealed when bystanders stand still. And let the story enter them. Remembered. Recorded. And then shared, sent out. *These* women, *that* other disciple, are why we have this story. We have it because they were just looking. They stood still.

“When you party, move your feet!” is a mantra for many of us. Our congressional representative Ayanna Pressley reminded us of that on the first Sunday of Lent, when a number of us were present on Boston Common to demonstrate solidarity with the people of the Ukraine.

What I’d like to suggest to you this noon, however, is that today is not primarily about activity. It’s not even primarily about our beliefs and creeds. His feet, the feet of these women and that disciple, do not move. And neither, perhaps, should ours for a time.

Instead, regard.

Regard. To behold, to *regard*, is the point of this day, the point of thousands of saints and patrons painted in over centuries at the foot of the cross. Stock still and staring up. It’s both an *emptying out* and a *giving over*, unaware, in the moment, of how they will be changed by what they are taking in.

Lancelot Andrewes, Anglican bishop and scholar during the reigns of Elizabeth and James I, preached on this day on 1604 that the passion of Jesus “Ripens us for regard.” Ripens us for regard. Just look.¹

“I don’t want a chaplain to tell me something,” said a man to me once when I was first learning about pastoral visiting. Cancer had consumed a good deal of his jaw and mouth. I was sitting next to his bed. “I want someone just to look at me, as if they understand at least a part of what I am living through.” He wasn’t asking for much, and at the same time he was asking for that which means everything: regard. He wanted me to *see* him. Freed from the pressure to say the *right* thing, the *memorable* thing, the somehow *useful* thing, I tried.

What is crucifixion, to its Roman conceivers, but a perverse form of display, a state-sponsored commandment to regard? The police state wishes us to see, to regard something: the dissident reduces to abject vulnerability and utter lack of control.

The God of the cross wishes us to regard something too: something different. Unbounded love. A love without limits. A higher vulnerability, a creative lack on control.

Look. See. Regard. Human blood. Human agony. Here is the man. *Ecce homo*. And here too is your God. A God who in an act of divine self-limitation has given *us* the keys. Is showing *us* beauty and goodness and truth, has offered *us* stewardship of nature, the capacity to reconcile, and the option to love.

¹ The full text of Andrewes’ 1604 sermon may be accessed easily at this site: [CMF eZine | Good Friday 1604 - Bishop Lancelot Andrewes \(cmfhq.org\)](http://cmf.eZine.com/GoodFriday1604-BishopLancelotAndrewes/cmfhq.org)

And all at the same time, this is a God who leaves us free to commit so much that denies and willfully undermines all of the above.

What greater love is there, finally, than that which releases the beloved to a place beyond willfulness and control? Even at such hideous and destructive cost? *They will look on the one they have pierced.*

What do those women and that other disciple regard as darkness falls at noon? They are by now beyond a certain kind of hope. A certain kind of planning or intervention or rescue. They do not yet see the resurrection coming. They are not yet running towards an empty tomb. Instead they are standing still. Stock still. Just looking. On the one we have pierced.

In his poem, “East Coker,” T.S. Eliot tells us something about those women and that other disciple, in their stillness. And perhaps about us, here and now, in our own.

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.²*

Be still. Just look. Regard. Here is the man. Here is your God.

² From Part III of “East Coker” in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. Complete text available here: <http://www.davidgorman.com/4quartets/>