



“A Comfortable Distance”

a sermon by

Rev. Katie Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
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With the echoes of the Palm Sunday celebration still ringing in our ears, with Jesus we now turn our attention to a week of suffering and trial as we begin to take the last few heavy steps to the cross. Our reading this Monday of Holy Week comes after the dusk of Gethsemane has closed in, after the Roman guards have seized Jesus like a bandit in private because they feared they would enrage the crowds if they arrested him in the temple during the day. Our reading comes after Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, after the disciples deserted him and fled, and after he is led away. Our reading comes to us from the gospel of Matthew 26:57-75.

“Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered. But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest; and going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.’” The high priest stood up and said, “Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?” But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, “I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?” They answered, “He deserves death.” Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, “Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?” Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” But he denied it before all of them, saying, “I do not know what you are talking about.” When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” Again he denied it with an oath, “I do not know the man.” After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.” Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know the man!” At that moment the cock crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: “Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.”

Just a chapter before this reading we see the disciples reclining around the table with Jesus at the last Passover feast they would share together. Then it is recorded that “Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” Peter said to him, “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.” Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” Peter said to him, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And so said all the disciples.” These are brave words. Brave words from a brave man. Brave at the time, at least. What could that evening possibly hold that would cause him to do such a thing? Had Jesus so far underestimated his devotion? Peter’s bravery and bravado eclipse any anxious thoughts that may have gone fleeting through his mind when Jesus had started talking crazy over the bread and the wine. “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” He said. Move the clock forward just a few hours and we see Peter, the representative disciple, slipping in the back of a crowded

room after following Jesus and the rabble from the garden at a comfortable distance. He finds a seat among the guards - waiting, the gospel says, to see how this would end. Turns out it ends badly. Very badly. And Peter watches with the others while Jesus is spit on and slapped. Taunted and mocked. His friend, who he had so boldly proclaimed to be the Messiah - the Son of the Most High God - sentenced to death before his eyes.

Amazing how you can break a sweat and get a chill all at the same time - good thing he was among the security by the door so he could slip out for some air. He strolls casually up to a fire in the courtyard where some of the help is gathered to get his thoughts in order. "Who, Jesus? I ... I don't know what your talking about ... Look, on my mother's grave, by the God of Abraham, I don't know the guy, all right? ... Who are you people? I'm telling you, I don't know the man!" Jesus stands his ground before the high priest, and Peter crumbles before the maid. And then that shriek pierces the night and Jesus' words come flooding back. My gosh, it was he who had underestimated his devotion and Jesus - Jesus knew it all along. And Peter broke down and he wept. But Jesus' wasn't the only prophecy to be fulfilled that night. Somewhere the ancient memory of Isaiah was stirred and the words of the prophet come rapping at the back door saying, "Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter ... The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, and was appalled that there was no one to intervene"

(Isaiah 59:14). Righteousness stands at a distance. A comfortable distance. And truth stumbles in the public square. Especially when it is just waiting to see how things will end before it decides whether or not it will speak up.

Are we really so predictable? I say we because, though Matthew sends Peter as the lone, representative disciple to the lounge where Caiaphas is holding court, we mustn't forget that in Matthew's world that representative disciple so often represents the others as well as us. And isn't it true that when it comes to matters of faith and life so often and particularly when it looks as though things are going quite badly indeed we go to such great lengths to be certain that we are not even associated with the scene of the crime, let alone caught going on record in the name of Jesus? The disciples drew their swords in Gethsemane when the lines were clearly drawn between right and wrong, but now in the public square, where everything tends to get a little more confused, not a one is there to rise to his defense. Instead, truth lingers in doorways, and righteousness denies any association for fear of being exposed. Around the table with our Lord surrounded by friends in the faith, epitaphs of devotion and determination flow freely like wine and resolutions about the lengths we would walk beside our God satisfy like bread. And in the garden or in the sanctuary on Sunday as the case may be the Roman guard itself could come crashing in and we would stand together resolute and ready for battle. But step out into the square Monday morning and it is so easy to see another story unfold. So often like Peter our courage is deflated and we find ourselves standing at that comfortable distance. The lone representative of our faith. Waiting to see how the story will end before we throw in our two cents, or perhaps pretend that we had nothing to offer at all.

There is something to be said for safety in numbers. But the fact is that we go out into the world every day and every day invariably we find ourselves in situations where we stand alone and

where we alone stand for Christ. And while the question may not always be so clear, you certainly know it when you hear it or overhear it or see it or sense it, 'Aren't you with Jesus?' And instead of staking our claim as we did when we were one among many in the chorus of the faithful we begin to run the scenarios in our minds and try to determine what's at stake and how we can get out of it. Try to imagine where the pathway of truth might lead us and then that anxiety comes creeping in. Soon like Peter who undoubtedly felt backed against a cold and sweating wall you find yourself wondering, is this moment about discipleship? And before you know it the cock is crowing. And you did not stand for the one who would never fail to stand for you.

Peter realized that he denied Jesus when Jesus would never have denied him. Even though Jesus knew that Peter would claim ignorance while the ink still dried on his death sentence, he broke bread and reclined at the table with him anyway. In fact, endured the mockery of a trial and suffered scourging for him anyway. Shouldered his executioner and dragged it to the top of a hill and got himself hung it for Peter, for all the other deserter disciples, and for all of us anyway. And despite the fear, despite the lingering, the weighing of consequences, the denial, the betrayal, uttered those last words anyway, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Despite the fact that he knows the worst we have to offer even while we recline at his table, 'Father forgive them.'

In three days time Jesus would reveal himself to Peter at his resurrection, and throughout time by the power of the Holy Spirit he would continue to do the same for us. And while Peter and each of us are humans who fail and can never promise to deliver anything other than our best efforts from moment to moment, he entrusts his church to our hands, and hands over the keys to kingdom and eternal life. Not because he has overestimated our devotion, but because of his love. Because he will take us any way we can come even if it means that the church will never be perfect on this earth, for at least it will be real, with him perfectly real among us. It would be a great loss if in this holy week we did not come to appreciate the part we play in that phrase 'suffering Savior.' Not because we should feel guilty about it but because only when we come to terms with that can we truly understand the potency of his sacrifice, and the depth of love within the one whose last prayer would be for our forgiveness, whose last act would be to ensure our redemption. Who raises us up to his level and empowers us so that somehow in this world through his church righteousness does stand tall, and truth can clear its throat.

Admittedly a little distance from Jesus can be a lot more comfortable than proximity at times. But don't you know that the events of this holy week unfold in such a way as to tell us a story whose moral it is that wherever we stand we never stand alone. So that always, in everything, we can stand for Christ. Amen.