



GOOD FRIDAY (Seven Last Words or Women of the Stations of the Cross)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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1. Introduction

Throughout Christendom, Good Friday worship services take many forms. This cultural resource unit is designed to provide congregations with a look at an emerging and dynamic method of celebrating Good Friday. In it we consider more deeply the supportive roles played by the seven women at the cross in Jesus' final moments.

SEVEN WOMEN AT THE CROSS

The Lenten season worship service, Seven Women at the Cross, is held during Holy Week at Sisters Chapel on the campus of Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia.

It was designed to elevate women as visible and valuable contributors to, and leaders of, religious life, salvation history, and Christian faith. Seven Women at the Cross, provided an opportunity for seven women preachers to engage and give voice to the seven women whose faith during Jesus' last seven days of life inspires acts of worship.

With full recognition of the tendency in Christian worship to marginalize women and their role as the essential designated witnesses to the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, this worship experience, through the preached word, moves women from the periphery to the center of theological reflection and discourse. Each woman at the cross was shown to have distinguished herself as a servant of God; and to have been a strong and devoted woman who followed Jesus from Galilee to Calvary.

II. Seven Lenten Narratives about Women

And the women were there...

Women were also there; women have always been there; and women continue to be present to carry the message of our Christian faith. During this service, seven women preachers open the biblical narrative in creative and authentic ways to highlight the ways in which women cared for Jesus, served the Christian community, and worshiped God. They help reveal the spiritual lessons about the nature and practice of Christian faith as seen through the everyday experiences of our biblical sisters. Their journey with or near Jesus during Holy Week inspires men and women alike toward a renewed sense of spiritual commitment, sacrifice, and worship.

Included in this reflection are narratives concerning unnamed women -- the widow who came with her offering, the woman with the alabaster box, and the daughters of Jerusalem. In addition, there are many other women, some of whom were present during the crucifixion, burial and resurrection, including Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. Enduring, determined, persevering, bold and audacious women, waiting, wailing and victorious women, tell their story.

THE WIDOW AND HER OFFERING (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4)

The widow's offering of two copper coins, the least valuable currency -- less than a penny-- is given in contrast to giving out of a surplus of one's wealth. It is easy to give out of one's abundance or to offer to God leftovers; but to give out of one's poverty requires a higher level of faith, commitment, sacrifice, and selflessness. Not much is recorded about the widow, but we know that she was poor, yet gave all of the money that she had. We also know that the Temple Treasury was in the Court of Women, one of the few places in the inner temple women could enter. We know that the religious leaders were unjust to women and the poor, requiring both groups to pay the same taxes as the wealthy. We know the widow's giving transcended Temple obligations, or what was legally due from worshippers. The widow gave her required *tithe*, but also gave a voluntary offering not required, but inspired by her love for God. This is a woman of exemplary character; a woman willing to give everything to God. What shall you render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward you? (*Reference scripture: Psalm 116:12; Reference hymn, "What Shall I Render to the Lord?" Isaac Watts*)¹

THE WOMAN WITH THE ALABASTER BOX (Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9)

The anointing of Jesus at Bethany by a woman, believed by some to be Mary, the sister of Lazarus, is an amazing testimony to the faith, love, and honor offered Jesus Christ in preparation for his burial. The nature of this act of reverence and the costly oil used to anoint Jesus are evidence of the wisdom Mary received at the feet of Jesus, and illuminates her conviction that our Lord deserves the

very best of what we have to offer. A jar of nard oil, produced by crushing and refining stems from the spikenard plant, was very expensive. Used as perfume, a sedative, incense and herbal medicine, this aromatic oil was worth a year's salary, or about 300 US dollars. Mary's gesture of breaking the jar and emptying every drop of oil onto the head of Jesus is a sacrifice of love and commitment of faith. The willingness of Mary to give all she had brought forth praises from Jesus. (*Reference scripture: Psalm 116:12; Reference song, Alabaster Box*" CeCe Winans)²

THE DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM (Luke 23:27-29)

On the way to the place of crucifixion, groups of women began to lament the tragic foolishness of Jesus' impending death. Some refer to these sisters as professional mourners—women who rendered public grief when violence, suffering, and death occurred—one of those rare opportunities for women to assume a public function. This group of unnamed women who followed Jesus to Calvary offered traditional expressions of grief by beating their breast, weeping and wailing. Jesus joins the lament of the daughters of Jerusalem. Reminiscent of his weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44) our Lord now entreats the daughters of Jerusalem to not weep for him, but for themselves and their children; for the injustices they have and will confront; for the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the suffering of the innocent. The lament is a call for us to stop violence and suffering; a call to repentance and commitment; a call to a new way of being with God and each other. Our only hope is to trust in God's faithfulness. (*Reference scripture: Lamentations 3:22-23; Reference hymn, "Great is thy Faithfulness," Thomas O. Chisholm*)³

MARY THE MOTHER OF JESUS (John 19:25-27)

Mary who pondered the truth and magnitude of her Son's mission and ministry stood supported by her sister and other women from the community near the cross. Faithful women were present with Jesus at his death, and as painful as it was, even his mother was there. Mothers have a special place in the hearts of their children, and when Jesus saw his mother watching the horror of the crucifixion, he called upon his beloved disciple, believed by many to be John the evangelist and the author of the Johannine tradition, and said, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." The agony, pain and grief of a mother over the violence, suffering and impending death endured by a child moved Jesus to broaden the notion of family. Knowing the vulnerability of women, especially those who did not have the association and protection of a man in first century Palestine, Jesus connects his mother with his disciple and redefined the boundaries of family and community. (*Reference songs, African American Spiritual, "Weeping Mary," Roland Hayes and "Take My Mother Home," Hal Johnson*)⁴

WOMEN AT THE CRUCIFIXION (Mark 15:39-40)

They brought Jesus to a place called Golgotha. He hung on the cross in the heat of the day. His mouth begging for water yet they offered him wine mixed with myrrh. As they divided his clothes, cast lots, hurled insults, and ridiculed him, the women were there. When Jesus breathed his last breath and died, the women were there. They did not run, did not hide, nor did they avoid the agony of the cross. They were not allowed to come up close and personal, but from a distance their presence significantly influenced the atmosphere. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome were among the women from Galilee who on the sidelines and in the background were present when Jesus suffered and died. They followed and cared for Jesus' needs in Galilee and they now stood to witness his suffering during his crucifixion. They could not care for him at that moment, but they waited in silence for an opportunity to employ their agency. In the mean

time, in the in-between time, their confidence and faith in God's saving power persevered. As essential designated witnesses to the death of Jesus, these Galilean women looked forward to the Sabbath and anointing his body for burial. (*Reference scripture: Galatians 6:1; Reference hymn, The Old Rugged Cross, George Bennard*)⁵

WOMEN AT THE BURIAL AND TOMB (Mark 15:47)

Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus watched and saw where his body was laid. They must have followed Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, who donated his own tomb for Jesus' burial, prepared Jesus' body, wrapped it in linen cloth, placed it in a tomb, and rolled a stone against the entrance. Women are always ready; ready to serve; ready to give of their essence, ready to minister to Jesus, and so they were there, present for his burial and waiting. Determined and unwavering in their resolve to anoint his body they believed in the impossible. On the other side of a sealed tomb laid Jesus' body, but the women would not give up; they would not allow their goals to be crushed. The sealed tomb would not have the final say. The women had known difficult situations before. They had encountered the impossible before. Doors had been closed and opportunities denied them, but their faith and trust in God had always prevailed. Not knowing what to expect, the women were conscious, confident, and courageous. They would come back on the Sabbath to anoint the body of Jesus. (*Reference song, African American Spiritual, "Were You There?"*)⁶

WOMEN AND THE WITNESS OF THE EMPTY TOMB (Luke 24:4-6; Mark 16:1-4; 6)

The stone presented an obstacle to anointing the body of Jesus, but the women came to the tomb anyway. When the male disciples were nowhere to be found the women were there. Mary Magdalene, a devoted disciple of Jesus, an exemplar of penitence, healed of evil spirits and infirmities, along with Mary the mother of James and wife of Zebedee, and Salome, daughter of Herodias and stepdaughter of Herod Antipas, came on faith. They bought spices believing that the size of the rock would not deter them from serving their Lord. Against insurmountable odds their faith propelled them toward the tomb. Faith allowed them to look beyond the physical manifestations of impossibilities. They pressed their way to the tomb and asked each other, who will roll the stone away from the entrance? But the stone, which was huge, had already been rolled away and the tomb was empty. Christ had risen. The faith and perseverance, commitment and resilience of women endured and was rewarded. God is faithful. (*Reference scripture: Hebrews 10:23; Reference song, I'm standing on the Promises of God, R. Kelso Carter*)⁷

Notes

1. Watts, Isaac. "What Shall I Render to the Lord?" Online location: (lyrics) www.cyberhymnal.org accessed 10 November 2007
2. Winans, CeCe. *Alabaster Box*. Brentwood, TN: Sparrow Records, 1999.
3. Chisholm, Thomas O. "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." Online location: (lyrics) www.cyberhymnal.org accessed 10 November 2007
4. Hayes, Roland. "Weeping Mary."; and Johnson, Hall. "Take My Mother Home."

5. Bennard, George. "The Old Rugged Cross." Online location: (lyrics) www.cyberhymnal.org accessed 10 November 2007
6. Johnson, J. W. and Johnson, J. R. "Were You There?" Online location: (lyrics) www.negrospirital.com accessed 10 November 2007
7. Carter, R. Kelso. "I'm standing on the Promises of God." Online location: www.cyberhymnal.org/bio/c/a/r/carter_rk.htm accessed 10 November 2007
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