

Witnesses: 4. Mother/Mary

John 19:25-27

March 26, 2017

Pastor Steve Richards

Memory is an amazing thing. In an instant, we can travel from the present to a moment decades earlier. We remember what was said and seen and touched and smelled. Last Sunday evening, my daughter and I were visiting my Dad. He is living in a memory care facility. His dementia has been increasing, but it isn't because he doesn't remember. He may not remember what day it is or who I am or where he lives, but he still remembers. We stopped to see if he would let her cut his hair (that's what she does), but he didn't remember that she could cut hair – and so he refused, but the question prompted a memory from when he was a child and cut his younger sister's hair. And in the way he described it, you might have thought it had happened just moments ago. In our series on the witnesses who stood near the cross as Jesus was crucified, we turn our focus to Mary, the mother of Jesus. And the memories she must have had as she watched and listened that afternoon.

Mary was 49 years old. She is standing with her son, Jesus, at the foot of the cross. Her day began at 6:00 a.m. when the high priest sent Jesus to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, to be tried for the crime of insurrection – leading a rebellion against Rome's authority. Jesus had been arrested by the Temple guards during the night, put on trial before the Sanhedrin, and convicted of blasphemy but only the Romans could put a person to death. So new charges were necessary that would work in a Roman court. That meant he was charged with insurrection. That night, Mary stood outside the home of the high priest, waiting to see her son. She watched as he was led away in shackles. She walked with the crowd that followed, hoping but sensing this would not turn out well for her son. She arrived outside the home of Pontius Pilate and watched as Pilate walked outside and said to the crowd, "What would you have me do with this man?" And it took her breath away when the crowd shouted, "Crucify him!" By 7:00 a.m., Pilate sent Jesus to be taught a lesson by the palace guard. They beat him nearly to death, spit on him, put a crown of thorns on his head and sent him back to Pilate. Mary could barely recognize Jesus now. He was a bloody mess. Again, Pilate presented Jesus to the crowd, "What would you have me do with him?" And once more, the crowd shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" By 8:00 a.m., Pilate ordered the guard to take Jesus outside the city where he was nailed to a cross and left to die a slow agonizing death. Mary stood there in the crowd watching, listening. For six hours, Mary stood by her son. Can you sense her pain on this the worst day of her life? What was Mary thinking? What memories must have been going through her mind? Mel Gibson captured this in his portrayal of Mary in the 2004 movie *The Passion of the Christ*.

Most of the disciples were not there. To be honest, I would not want to be there. It would be a moment burned into your memory forever. John's gospel tells us who was there. **Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.** (John 19:25) Four people; all of them were women. They were not the people we might expect to be there, but John makes it clear that the women did not leave.

Mary is there. Standing there, she can't help but remember when it all began. The beginning when the angel Gabriel announced that she would bear a son and call him Yeshua – the Aramaic word for Jesus, meaning "God saves." She remembers that night in a modern day parking garage surrounded by animals and a feeding trough, she gave birth and held him in her arms. She remembers that moment eight days later when she and Joseph brought their son to the Temple and this old man named Simeon said, "**This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the**

thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” (Luke 2:34-35) Did she know what he meant? That one day her heart would be pierced and she would be left broken by death, watching her son die an excruciatingly painful and publicly humiliating death? Mary was there. She didn’t run. She didn’t hide. She was there. She was there when Jesus was twelve and left behind in the Temple, causing Mary and Joseph to frantically return to Jerusalem only to discover he was talking with the rabbis and hear him say, “Of course, you would find me in my Father’s house.” Did she know then? She witnessed his ministry, his travels, his teaching, his miracles. She was there.

And isn’t that what mothers do? I’m often amazed at what my own mother knows about what I’m doing. Chances are she is watching online right now, and she’s often the first one to send me a note after the service is over. She didn’t just bring me into the world and then push me out of the nest when I turned 18. She keeps showing up and lets me know I’m still part of her. She won’t let me go. And now as Mary’s son hangs on the cross, somewhere between life and death, even now she is there. And that she is there points to the nature of God’s love. God’s love is always there. Mary becomes the summation of Jesus’ earthly ministry – God with us – with us! She’s at the cross to remind us that God is always there. God’s love never fails. It goes before us, never forsakes us. God’s love endures. That’s the figure of Mary standing at the cross – the embodiment of God’s love with Jesus in the moment of his greatest pain.

Looking down from the cross, Jesus says, “Woman, this is your son.” He’s referring to John, one of the first disciples that Jesus called. We don’t hear much from John, but he was with Jesus when Jesus went to the mount of transfiguration – when Jesus was revealed to Peter, James and John as the one true Messiah. John was at the table in the Upper Room that final night, seated right beside Jesus, listening, watching as Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, showing that greatness is found in humble service. John was listening when Jesus said, **A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.** (John 13:34) In this scene from the cross, I think John is like us. We’ve listened, we’ve received this same command to love as God loves. And at the cross these two, Mary representing the boundless nature of God’s love and John representing our readiness to love – these two come together. To his mother: “Woman, this is your son.” And to his disciple: “Here is your mother.” This is his last will and testament. He is offering directives for his family. He doesn’t have much time. He doesn’t have much energy. He’s dying and with his dying breath – it’s not heirlooms or investments or property that they will inherit. No money, no life insurance policy. Instead, they are given a purpose. Woman, this is your son. John, here is your mother. Jesus is giving a new relationship. Jesus is turning them toward each other and saying it’s now time to love each other as though you are inseparably connected – love each other without condition – love with all you have and all you are. This is the love that must endure. You are family. Because of me and my will for you, I want you to love each other. This the new command. This is the Kingdom of God.

Mark’s gospel tells us of a time when Jesus’ mother and brothers showed up to see him. And when Jesus was told that they had arrived and were looking for him, he said, **“Who are my mother and my brothers?” Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”** (Mark 3:34-35) Whoever does the will of God gets close enough to the cross to hear his final words; whoever would follow him; whoever would do what Jesus did becomes family.

In that moment as Mary and John turn toward each other, we also see what the church should be. At its best, the church is a community of people who come together and leaves no one behind. In God’s family, there should be no orphans, no widows, not outcasts, no strangers. We

want everyone included. This is the love initiated at the cross of Jesus. At its best, the church is an adoption agency where everyone becomes family. But it's messy, isn't it? If we are to be family to everyone, if strangers are to become friends, then what does that mean for the people we don't agree with or the people who don't act like us or the people more broken than we already are? What about people who are our enemies or out to get us or people who are different. It's messy. Family is messy – and do we even want into a family that would welcome anyone?

In his book *Listening at Golgatha*, Peter Storey a retired bishop in the Methodist Church of South Africa, says, “**If everyone is kin to me, would that not make every war in history a civil war and every casualty a death in my family?**” Did Jesus understand the implications of what he was doing? Is this even possible? If everywhere we go, wherever we are, we are to love one another the same way that God loves us – the way Mary loves Jesus – the way Jesus instilled that love in his disciples – the same way Jesus will Mary and John to love each other. This is not easy, is it? It's risky. It's messy. It's hard. But would Jesus give us an impossible purpose?

Yesterday, a few of us gathered her to remember the life of Joyce Pultz. Most of you never met her, but she was part of our family. Joyce was 68 years old when she found this church. She wasn't really looking for a church. She hadn't had a church in a very long time – didn't really need a church and wasn't sure that God even cared about her – if there was a God. Life had not gone well for Joyce. When she was 43, a son died in an accident. A year later her marriage ended, and two years later her second son took his own life and by the time she came to this church she was estranged from her remaining son. Life can be complicated and messy and it was for Joyce – not what anyone dreams it might be. Then in the spring of 2002, she contracted an illness that nearly took her life and in the midst of that illness this church began to pray for her. She didn't know us and we didn't know her, but a co-worker who happened to be a member of this church began to visit Joyce in the hospital and pray for her and tell her there was a church where people cared. A few months later, Joyce tested the water – and made her first visit here – her first visit to church in a very long time. It took her another three years before she would become a member. It was a gradual process of finding that way that Jesus was talking about. It's called a relationship and relationships can take time.

In 2005, she was looking ahead to her retirement from the neurological clinic where she had worked. I asked her, “Joyce what sorts of things would you like to do in your retirement.” She mentioned just one thing – volunteer in the church office. Not only did she begin volunteering in the church office, but she moved in and found a family. Messiah Church became her family, and she told me it changed her life. And in her final days, it was her family – you, Messiah Church, who remained alongside her, assuring her that she was loved with a love that would never let go of her.

As Jesus was on the cross, twisting and writhing in pain, he turns two people toward each other. As Jesus is nailed to the cross, Jesus is also nailing us together, so we would never break apart, so we would never abandon each other, but live by a love that never fails. What if that's what the world saw when they looked at the church? What if that's what this community saw when they looked at Messiah Church? What if that's what the people around you saw when they looked to you? I'd like to live in that kind of world.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of March 26, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Lord Jesus, so often we want to tell you our plans, our wishes, our dreams. Grow in us a spirit that is willing to obey the divine command: "Listen to him!" Quiet our demands and wishes, and help us to listen to you. Make us willing to take up whatever task you call us to do for you. Amen.

Monday, March 27

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38, 2:34-35

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom." Then Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?" The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's Son. Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive' is now six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God." Then Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too."

Observation: This week we will focus on Jesus' mother Mary and his disciple, John. Mary first entered the Bible story engaged to be married, and therefore likely in her mid-teens (marrying age in her culture). When God's messenger called her to a life-changing, world-changing mission, she responded with faith and trust. Shortly after Jesus' birth, she and Joseph met elderly Simeon, who warned them of the challenges they and Jesus would face during his life.

Application: The angel Gabriel laid out for Mary a reality and a task whose details she couldn't (and we can't) fully understand. How does her response in Luke 1:38 ("I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.") speak to your heart? Are you willing to surrender your life to God's leading, even if that sometimes calls you to trust in ways that reach beyond intellectual understanding?

Prayer: Lord God, in Galatians 4, Paul wrote that "God sent his Son, born through a woman"—the humble, brave Mary. I, too, am your servant—use me in whatever ways you wish to build your kingdom. Amen.

Tuesday, March 28

Scripture: Luke 5:1-11

One day Jesus was standing beside Lake Gennesaret when the crowd pressed in around him to hear God's word. Jesus saw two boats sitting by the lake. The fishermen had gone ashore and were washing their nets. Jesus boarded one of the boats, the one that belonged to Simon, then

asked him to row out a little distance from the shore. Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he finished speaking to the crowds, he said to Simon, "Row out farther, into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch." Simon replied, "Master, we've worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I'll drop the nets." So they dropped the nets and their catch was so huge that their nets were splitting. They signaled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats so full that they were about to sink. When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Leave me, Lord, for I'm a sinner!" Peter and those with him were overcome with amazement because of the number of fish they caught. James and John, Zebedee's sons, were Simon's partners and they were amazed too. Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people." As soon as they brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

Observation: This story is the first in which John becomes part of Jesus' story. (Matthew and Mark told the story with less detail.) Luke introduced John and his brother James merely as "Simon's partners"—read verse 10 carefully or you might completely miss John! Nevertheless, we see that John (along with Peter and James) found Jesus credible and followed him, no matter the cost.

Application: Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher. Peter and his partners caught fish for a living. Why should "pros" like them listen when Jesus said, "Row out farther, into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch" (verse 4)? They agreed "because you say so." Have you ever had a sense that Jesus was calling you to something that was more than "usual" or "logical"? Were you open to saying, "All right, Lord – because you say so"? Are you open to that today?

Prayer: Lord God, you did big things in small ways, changing the world one heart, one life at a time. Make me, like John and Peter, someone willing to take up whatever task you call me to do for you. Amen.

Wednesday, March 29

Scripture: John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the celebration. When the wine ran out, Jesus' mother said to him, "They don't have any wine." Jesus replied, "Woman, what does that have to do with me? My time hasn't come yet." His mother told the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Nearby were six stone water jars used for the Jewish cleansing ritual, each able to hold about twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water," and they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some from them and take it to the headwaiter," and they did. The headwaiter tasted the water that had become wine. He didn't know where it came from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. The headwaiter called the groom and said, "Everyone serves the good wine first. They bring out the second-rate wine only when the guests are drinking freely. You kept the good wine until now." This was the first miraculous sign that Jesus did in Cana of Galilee. He revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

Observation: Jesus' mother was there at "the first miraculous sign that Jesus did in Cana of Galilee." The *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* noted, "Jesus' conversation with her in John 2 does not indicate disrespect, but rather shows John's emphasis on Jesus' own authority and responsibility for his mission and implies Mary's discipleship." She already, like the other disciples later, clearly trusted that her unique son could do anything necessary (verse 3).

Application: The Christmas song “Mary, Did You Know?” asks, “Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new? This child that you’ve delivered will soon deliver you?” This story highlights the shift Mary had to make from guiding, protecting mother to faithful, following disciple. When did you begin following Jesus? When have you needed to deepen your choice to surrender control of your life to Jesus?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you used so many different images to point to how much better life is when I live it with you. Fill me to the brim with the high-quality life you came to give your children. Amen.

Thursday, March 30

Scripture: Mark 9:1-8

Jesus continued, "I assure you that some standing here won't die before they see God's kingdom arrive in power."

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain where they were alone. He was transformed in front of them, and his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white. Elijah and Moses appeared and were talking with Jesus. Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, "Rabbi, it's good that we're here. Let's make three shrines—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He said this because he didn't know how to respond, for the three of them were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, "This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!" Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

Observation: A flash of light, Moses, Elijah, and God's voice. For Peter, John and James, seeing Jesus' glory and deity left them speechless. Up until this moment, Jesus usually looked like just another person. But now, "his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white." This was not some random light show. As an advance glimpse of God's kingdom arriving in power (verse 1), it was a time to strengthen Jesus and the disciples for the cross that lay just ahead.

Application: The light, the vision of Moses and Elijah, the dazzling white clothes – all were impressive. But the deepest impression of all came from the voice that said, "This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!" John obeyed that voice for the rest of his life. What does it mean for you to listen to Jesus today? Are you willing to do it?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, so often I want to tell you my plans, my wishes, my dreams. Grow in me a spirit that is willing to obey the divine command: "Listen to him!" Quiet my demands and wishes when I need to listen to you. Amen.

Friday, March 31

Scripture: John 19:25-27

Jesus' mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene stood near the cross. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Observation: Most of the disciples fled when the guards arrested Jesus, but his mother was at the cross. Comparing this passage with Mark 15:40 and Matthew 27:56 leads many scholars to believe that Salome, mother of the sons of Zebedee, was the sister of Jesus' mother. If so, then

John the disciple was Mary's nephew. Jesus had brothers, but John 7:5 said they did not believe in him yet. So he asked loyal John to care for Mary.

Application: We often speak of the people in the church who surround and support us as "our church family." Mark 15:40-41 said Mary was not alone at Jesus' cross—other women were with her. How telling is it that even a pivotal figure like Mary did not have to face her son's crucifixion in a solitary, self-sufficient way? Who are the people in your church that you can count on in tough times?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, even as you hung in agony on the Cross with the salvation of the world hanging in the balance, you still thought of your mother's care. Help and guide me to be equally caring and wise about those I love. Amen.

Saturday, April 1

Scripture: Luke 24:30-44, Acts 1:12-14

After he took his seat at the table with them, he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other, "Weren't our hearts on fire when he spoke to us along the road and when he explained the scriptures for us?" They got up right then and returned to Jerusalem. They found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying to each other, "The Lord really has risen! He appeared to Simon!" Then the two disciples described what had happened along the road and how Jesus was made known to them as he broke the bread.

While they were saying these things, Jesus himself stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" They were terrified and afraid. They thought they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you startled? Why are doubts arising in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet. It's really me! Touch me and see, for a ghost doesn't have flesh and bones like you see I have." As he said this, he showed them his hands and feet. Because they were wondering and questioning in the midst of their happiness, he said to them, "Do you have anything to eat?" They gave him a piece of baked fish. Taking it, he ate it in front of them. Jesus said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, which is near Jerusalem—a sabbath day's journey away. When they entered the city, they went to the upstairs room where they were staying. Peter, John, James, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James, Alphaeus' son; Simon the zealot; and Judas, James' son—all were united in their devotion to prayer, along with some women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

Observation: Luke wrote that two followers of Jesus met and talked with the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. After they recognized Jesus, the two disciples rushed back to share the news with the others. Jesus himself appeared, and Luke reported in detail the ways he showed them he was no ghost, but physically alive. Mary was surely one of the "companions" in Luke 24:33, and in Acts 1, Luke specifically named Mary and John as present in the Upper Room. Imagine the deep joy Mary and John experienced as they worshipped the risen Jesus!

Application: Luke tells us that the early Christians were "united in their devotion to prayer." How do you think prayer was able to unite them? In what ways can you cultivate unity through the practice of prayer in your service to God, as an individual and as part of the church?

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for the witness of Mary and John through the darkness of despair and into the joy of seeing the risen Jesus. Empower me to pray Julian of Norwich's beautiful prayer: "All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." Amen.