

Man in the Middle

John 20:1-18

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

April 17, 2022/Easter Sunday/Resurrection of the Lord

On this Easter Sunday, I want to ponder three scenes. The first from Good Friday, the second from Holy Saturday (at least metaphorically) and the third from Easter Sunday.

The three scenes are all organized under the theme, “The Man in the Middle.” This is actually the name of my sermon, despite what you see in your bulletins.

(Jackie is discovering the unfortunate truth that Helen and Carol learned before her which is that my sermon often undergoes quite drastic changes between Wednesday or Thursday when the bulletin is finalized and Sunday morning.)

So, three scenes. The man in the middle.

For the first scene, we go back three days to Good Friday. Each year, some part of the terrible story of Jesus’ death grabs my attention in a new way.

This year, it was the criminals on either side of Jesus on the cross in Luke’s gospel.

They may have been common thieves. More likely, they were insurrectionists of some sort or another. Crucifixion was a common way to deal with anyone who challenged the power of Rome. It was a “deterrent” of the most powerful and gruesome sort.

In Matthew’s and Mark’s version of the story, the two criminals join everyone else in heaping insults and scorn upon Jesus.

They add to the general commentary on how poorly this Saviour is performing.

He saved others. Let him save himself. If you’re the Messiah, let’s see some action! Some “king of Israel! Come down off that wretched cross if you are who you say you are.”

Luke’s version is a bit different. In his telling, one of the criminals adds a more personal twist to the insults: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself *and us!*”

The other one, however, pleads for mercy. Maybe he started with insults. Maybe as death grew ever closer his tune changed. Who knows?

But in the end, he says, *We're getting what we deserve*, he says. *This man has done nothing wrong.*

And then he looks at Jesus and says the words that all of us probably say in different ways at some point or another in our lives, when we come to the end of ourselves, when we have failed one too many times, when our faith is flagging and our hope seems weak... *Jesus, remember me.*

As I heard these familiar words from Luke's gospel on Maundy Thursday, I thought, "These criminals could represent two common approaches to God.

One response wants a God who does our bidding. It clings to its own self-interest and self-righteousness. It is interested only in a God that validates its own expectations and assumptions about the world and how it works, about God and how God works.

What good is a God on a cross? What good is a God who hangs there dying impotently? Why would anyone bother with someone who delivers such poor results?

Save yourself! And us, while you're at it!

The other looks at Jesus and sees goodness, truth, beauty, love, innocence, and—somehow—hope. There is a humility and a helplessness to this response. It knows that it has done wrong and cannot appeal to its own merit. All it can say is, *Jesus, remember me.*

Jesus hangs there in between these two oh-so-human responses, between we who demand a God on our terms and we who slowly come to realize that God on God's terms is what we actually need.

Jesus hangs there. The man in the middle.

For the second scene, we move to the metaphorical Holy Saturday, the time of our lived experience.

Fr. James Martin once put it like this:

Most of our lives are spent in Holy Saturday. In other words, most of our days are not filled with the unbearable pain of a Good Friday. Nor are they suffused with the unbelievable joy of an Easter. Some days are indeed times of great pain and some are of great joy, but most are...in between. Most are, in fact, times of waiting.¹

This cross is a perfect symbol of this. The cross is still a cross. It's an ugly symbol, an instrument of torture and death. But the flowers point to what God has done with and through this ugliness. The point to a promised hope still waiting for its final fulfilment.

In the second scene, I want to take you to a story from a place that knows all about waiting: the jail. This story took place a few years ago. In this story, I was the man—the *only* man—in the middle.

The jail is a pretty reliable place to find the responses on either side of Jesus on the cross represented. You find plenty of self-justification and accusation, plenty of, “Well, God, what are you gonna do for me? If you're who you say you are, let's have some action!”

You also find people who say something like, “Yeah, we're here for a reason. I've done a lot of bad things, Jesus, please remember me!”

Before the pandemic, I would go out to the jail on Monday mornings where I was part of a support group for some of the male inmates. Usually only a handful showed up.

But one morning, there were two mistakes made. The first was that the security guard called the wrong unit to the chapel. So, instead of the handful of men who usually showed up, it was nearly twenty women.

In the jail you learn to play the hand you're dealt, we widened the circle, we found a few more bibles, photocopied a few more lessons. The women had shown up and we couldn't very well turn them away.

The second mistake was made when the woman beside me was assigned to read one of the bible passages. She was probably around my age although she looked older. She had missing teeth, scars, crude tattoos.

She was supposed to read John 8:12:

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

¹ <https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/we-live-holy-saturday>

Which is of course a great verse to read in at any time, however we find ourselves waiting between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

But she made a mistake. She started two verses earlier, with the end of the story of the woman caught in adultery:

Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

A few women started to interrupt her as she read. “Nah, that’s the wrong verse... “ But she kept reading.

We looked around at each other after she was done. There were a few smiles exchanged before we moved on to read the “right” one. It felt like one of those accidents that wasn’t really an accident at all.

I asked the women around the circle if they knew the story that preceded those verses. Nearly all of them did. “Yeah, it’s my favourite story in the whole bible... I love that one... Me too...”

And why wouldn’t it be? A woman condemned by righteous men for sins that at the very least she was only partially and almost certainly unequally implicated in.

A woman trained by life to expect the worst who gets a second chance. A woman whose dignity and worth is acknowledged both in the refusal to condemn *and* the injunction to go and sin no more.

A woman who encounters Jesus and a different script.

Jesus, who would ultimately be condemned for sins that he did not commit by the same sorts of “righteous men” eager to condemn this woman, does *not* condemn her.

And in so doing, the light of the world cracks open the door of the world of darkness just a little bit more.

There were a few sniffles. A few eyes searching out shoes. A roll of toilet paper was passed around for tear-stained faces.

I thanked God for holy “mistakes.” I thanked God for changing the script when the women showed up.

Third scene. Easter Sunday. Another scene where the women show up to find that Jesus has changed the script.

John 20:1:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

We should pause here to note something important. The first people to encounter the shock of a resurrection were women.

Again, the four gospel accounts differ slightly.

In John, it’s “Mary Magdalene.”

In Luke, it’s “the women.”

Mark is the most specific, naming “Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome.”

In Matthew, it’s Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary.”

But all four are unanimous. The women were first on the scene to the discovery that changed the world. This would not have been a convenient thing to note—women’s testimony was not valid in the ancient world—yet all four gospel accounts insist upon it.

Jesus changes the script.

At any rate, Mary sees the stone rolled away and rushes off to tell the disciples. Peter and “the other disciple” come rushing back and peer into the tomb, needing to see for themselves that the tomb is empty, not relying on the testimony of Mary.

The disciples see the strips of linen lying neatly in the tomb. They still have no idea what is going on. And they leave.

But Mary stays. She sits, crying. She peers through her tears back into the empty tomb.

And she sees two angels where Jesus' body had been, one at the head, one at the foot.

What an interesting detail to note, I thought, as I read the story this year. And what an interesting symmetry.

When Jesus dies, he has two criminals for company. Two criminals that could represent all of humanity. And three days later, there are also two companions. Two angels.

But here, there is no man in the middle. There is no body where a body should be.

The innocent one who was condemned to death by "righteous" men, who prayed forgive them, they don't know what they are doing as he died, has left death behind, has changed the course of history forever.

He has become the man in the middle... of everything. Of God's story. Of history. Of our individual stories. Of reality itself.

Mary doesn't know this yet. She is in a fog, not understanding. *Where have they taken him?*

She doesn't even recognize Jesus when he's right in front of her. She confuses him with the gardener.

The glorious truth of Easter only dawns on Mary when Jesus speaks her name. That's when the scales fall from her eyes. That's when she sees the incredible truth.

And so, on this Easter Sunday, 2022, we once again joyfully proclaim the good news of the man in the middle.

The man who hung and died between two criminals, between mockery and a cry for mercy. The man who flipped the script by offering mercy where condemnation was expected. The man whom death could not keep down.

This man is the one in whom our God is most fully and truly and finally revealed.

And this man now stands in the middle of all that is. His resurrection is the epicentre at the very heart of reality forever redefining what is possible in our world and in our lives.

The women in the jail were supposed to read John 8:12.

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

They eventually got there. ☺

The empty tomb shows us this “light of life” in action. Life is, ultimately, our destination and home. Life has primacy over death—it is more real than death, no matter how things might appear from our limited vantage points of closed horizons and small imaginations.

Life is what we were made for.

And life is—shockingly, delightfully, unimaginably!—promised by the crucified and risen Lord of life, the one the grave could not contain, the one who holds out his hand and drags all of creation along into newness and peace.

The empty tomb stands in the center of all reality. It shines like a searchlight in all directions, into past, future and present, pointing a way through darkness and death.

It shines stronger and truer than all the bad news of our newspapers and our lives, all the wars and gloomy forecasts about the future of our species and the planet, all the afflictions we and those we love endure, all the human lives that death temporarily steals away from us, all of the apparent victories of darkness that we are all too familiar with.

In all cases, both great and small, Jesus’ resurrection life is the light by which we learn see and to live by the unlikeliest of futures for ourselves and for our world.

A pastoral colleague from Saskatchewan sent a text me at around 8:30 this morning as I was finishing up this sermon. The text said, “Pssst. Death loses. Happy Easter!”

Death *does* lose. It is no match for the risen Christ.

Death might *seem* to be winning at any given moment. God knows that there is pain and there is sadness and there is injustice and there is brokenness and ugliness all around us.

I have to confess that when Jackie asked for my sermon title on Tuesday, I was not in an Easter-y mood. I had just learned the terrible news of Johannes in Germany and was preparing a prayer vigil for him. Maundy Thursday and the story of Jesus’ betrayal and execution was looming.

Easter seemed a long way off. I had no idea what I might be saying five days later.

So, I just said, almost with resignation, “I don’t know, why don’t we call it ‘He is Risen!’” Hard to go wrong with that, right?

It is hard to go wrong with that. Because despite all the darkness around us, the empty tomb stands at the centre of reality boldly declaring that darkness must finally give way to light.

He *is* risen.

The man in the middle is mighty to save.

The man in the middle is the one who does not condemn you, who says, “Go, leave your life of sin.”

The man in middle is the risen Lord of history.

The man in the middle is the one who calls you, like Mary, by name.

This is the good news of Easter. And it is the very best news.

May we go forth with joy.

Amen.

