

Do We Truly Believe? By Holly C. W. Aastuen
March 28, 2010 Palm Sunday Luke 23:1-49

“Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.” Have you ever seen that warning on the passenger side mirror in some vehicles? It’s a warning that things may not be as they appear at first glance.

I was thinking of that phrase, ‘are closer than they appear,’ as I noticed something about the scene at Jesus’ crucifixion. I was impressed by how many people who were brought closer to God through the crucifixion event.

The people in the scene are really closer to God than you might think.

What happened during Jesus slow and agonizing crucifixion was that some of the outsiders were brought in, and as their eyes were opened they began to see God and find themselves in the reign of God. First consider the thief—one thief, a common criminal who had stolen enough to deserve death under Roman law, comes to Jesus’ defense against the other who had joined in the taunts of the crowd: “Some Messiah you are!” the other thief had said, “Save yourself! Save us!”

And the one thief scolds him, “Have you no fear of God? You’re getting the same as he is. We deserve this, but not him—he did nothing to deserve this.”

Then he said, “Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

And Jesus replied, “Don’t worry, I will. Today you will join me in paradise.”

Two criminals, two different reactions—one taunting and angry, the other repentant and humble, brought closer to Jesus on the cross—a thief who was given the promise of eternal life.

The second person I want to note with you stood and watched all that went on from the vantage point of the foot of the cross—the Roman centurion. Earlier that day he stood in the courtyard as Jesus was beaten and taunted by soldiers in the troop. Weighing on his mind was the fact that though he didn’t participate, he didn’t stop it either.

And as he stood and watched this man in the last moments of his life, as he watched him die, the way that Jesus asked for forgiveness for those who were doing this, the way the sky turned black and Jesus put his life in God’s hands all this changed the centurion and brought him closer to faith and to God. He found himself uttering these words, faithful words, “Truly this man was an innocent and righteous man!”

The third man I want to note with you comes after today’s reading. The story goes like this:

“Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and

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upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting of the kingdom of God. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid."

Because his eyes were open and alert to the kingdom of God, Joseph of Arimathea made room for the body of Jesus, offering Jesus the final dignity of a decent place for burial. His waiting for the kingdom of God prepared him for such a role and brought him closer to the Kingdom of God.

Three people, three entirely different stories and yet all of them drawn to Jesus and the love he represents. None of them were considered Jesus' disciples before this event, yet all of them could be considered such after Jesus' death.

And where were the disciples during all of this? The scripture tells us that "But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things."

They stood at a distance, watching. Though their hearts were right there with him, they stood apart.

Isn't it interesting that at this wrenching and incredible moment of God's gracious love, the ones who have been following all along are at a distance?

They had good reason to be distant, of course. Pilate and the other Romans were on the lookout for any of Jesus' followers, that's why Peter denied knowing Jesus, for fear of what might happen to him. They were fearful for their lives for if their leader could be crucified for no justifiable cause, why should their fate be any different? Pilate was so paranoid about the Hebrew nation overthrowing the Roman government; he would have welcomed the opportunity to squelch the rebellion through eliminating the opposition.

But as Pilate was seeking to squelch the Jesus movement, more converts were being made even as their leader was crucified.

Sometimes the people that seem the farthest away are closer to God than you might think.

It is hard to see who is 'in' and who is 'out' when considering the people at the cross. Sometimes it is hard for us to consider going all the way to the cross with Jesus when we'd rather not risk the pain and suffering. We who consider ourselves true believers should remember that though we are among the 17.5% of the nation's population that is in a church on any given weekend, we aren't the only ones who are welcomed into the kingdom of God.

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At the foot of the cross is a key place of belief. Everything Jesus has done up to this point has led him here. Jesus was willing to go all the way, to pay the ultimate price to show us how much he loves us.

May we be reminded this day that ALL are welcome into the kingdom and realm of God. And all through this week, as we stumble toward Jerusalem, may God help us remember that ALL of us are invited to enter into the joy of the Kingdom of God.