

Good Friday Witness

A Boy and His Lunch

by Sara Sosa

April 2014

Being young is hard. There is so much that I want to do and see, but I have to wait for permission first. Permission from grown-ups. Permission from my dad. I am waiting for that permission now. He is thinking.

I suppose he is thinking that a boy like me has no place on a hill like Calvary. On most days, I guess I would think he is right. But today is not most days. Today is the day that they have taken Jesus from Nazareth to Calvary to die. I still do not understand why.

The past week has been a blur. Many people are talking about him. About Jesus. I have heard many things said about him...everything from king to blasphemer. This is where being young has had an advantage. My ears have been open...listening to talk, to argument, to rumor. No one has noticed the young boy on the edge of a crowd, of a gathering, of a room filled with adults who have been trying to discern what to believe about Jesus. In this way, I have enjoyed being overlooked. But in their wondering, grappling and fear about Jesus and the claims surrounding him, I wish I had a voice. I could tell them who he is. I know.

My mind goes back to another hill. My father and I had walked a long way to hear Jesus teach. It was dry and dusty...hot. Thousands had gathered with curious minds wanting to decide for themselves if Jesus was the promised Messiah...or just a really good teacher. There were so many people gathered on the hillside...mostly men. But some of them had brought their families, too. Children and women were present in a way they could not have been if Jesus had been teaching in the temple. I noticed many people who were not Jewish. It occurs to me now that perhaps Jesus meant that to happen. Maybe he taught outside on purpose so that everyone could hear. So unlike the Jewish leaders of our synagogue.

I could hear his voice clear and strong...though we were far from him. I noticed some men gathered around him, trying to keep the crowds from pressing in too close, holding back mothers who were bold to draw near with their children. I asked my father about this group of men who seemed to be in service to Jesus. He told me they were his followers...his disciples.

As I listened to Jesus teach, I found I wanted to be his follower. His teaching was simple...a message a boy like me could understand. I listened, mesmerized by this teacher until my thoughts were interrupted by the grumbling of my stomach. I looked at the sun in the sky and realized it was well past the mid-day meal. I reached for the food my mother had given me when we left home that morning. A simple lunch of bread and fish.

As I opened the sack, one of the followers of Jesus came through the crowd looking for food. I stood up and offered my lunch. He walked over to me and looked in the bag, shrugged his shoulders and accepted my offering. "It's not much," I said quietly. He smiled and said, "It's more than nothing." I watched him walk away, wondering what he would do with my food. Then it occurred to me that he

might be bringing it to Jesus. The thought pulled me from my place beside my father and without realizing it, I ran after the man who had claimed my lunch for Jesus.

But it wasn't a lunch for Jesus. My bread and fish became so much more. In the hands of Jesus, it became lunch for EVERYONE. I watched my lunch multiplied over and over again until everyone on the hillside had fish and bread...thousands of us had fish and bread...and there was still some left over. He fed us physically that day...he fed me spiritually. I know who Jesus is. He revealed himself to me on that hillside.

So I wait for permission to join him on another hillside. Some might say a boy has no place there today. But Jesus doesn't see me as a boy. He sees me as a follower...one who has seen, recognized and chosen to believe. If anyone asks me, I will tell them who Jesus is. He is the one who gathers all people – young, old, male, female, Jewish, non-Jewish – all people to himself. He is the Messiah.

Good Friday Witness

Centurion

by Sara Sosa

April 2014

I didn't want this tour of duty. I was happier with my battalion back home. Close to my wife...my kids. Near to my friends. But when Rome calls, obedience is the only choice. I arrived in Jerusalem just last week. Crowds were already streaming into the city. Cheaters and thieves among them, plotting to overcharge, steal, bribe and kill anyone who got in the way. Perfect cover for them in these large crowds. I was bitter. I was angry. Who wants to be in Jerusalem during the Passover celebration of those Jews and their crazy zealots? Not me. No, not me.

Barely received by the other soldiers on duty, I could feel their cold stares and recognition of me as a temporary recruit from some outlying location. They didn't try to hide their contempt. I pretended I didn't care. I soon found I didn't like their way of soldiering. Keep the peace? That, I can do. Arrest those in violation of Roman law? I can do that, too. Abuse my power to take advantage of others? That's a place I can't go.

Yet I am standing on this lonely, forsaken hill they call Calvary. We are waiting for death to arrive and claim the three condemned souls up on those crosses. What a way to die. Surely there is another way to punish? I hate this job. Today, I don't even really like me. I stood by and watched, kept the crowd at bay, as these men were beaten, shoved, degraded, brutalized and nailed to wooden beams. Nails? Until today, I thought they used rope. I guess I am a simple country soldier. I've seen plenty of death, but this? This is different than taking the life of your enemy in combat. I may not have driven those spikes, but I certainly am part of this crucifixion. It makes my stomach turn. I try to think of my wife, but I have to stop. I don't want to bring her to this hill with me.

From where I stand, I can see these men as they struggle to breathe on their crosses. I can see the other soldiers gambling at their feet. I survey the crowd and see curiosity in some faces, satisfaction in others and extreme anguish in a few. There is a woman crumpled to the ground who seems to be unable to look up. Her grief emanates from her body. Close by, there is another woman in black. Silent tears are on her face as she makes herself look to the one in the middle. A man stands next to her with his arm around her, the pain of the moment clearly etched on his face. This must be family. Only family could stand and witness what they must witness.

My gaze shifts to the religious leaders gathered off to the side. A small group of men who clearly feel superior. I shake my head. These Jewish people are so fanatical about their faith. It doesn't appeal to me. Rules, rules and more rules. My world as a soldier has plenty of that. No, if I were going to be part of a religious movement, it would be compassion that would draw me, not more rules.

The Jewish leaders seem satisfied with what is taking place and they look like they are planning to leave the hill. I know they are concerned about the one in the middle...the one I have heard others call Jesus. I saw the sign they put above him in mockery...King of the Jews. I allow myself to think on that. What does it mean? Clearly he is not really a king. As a soldier of Rome, I would know if we had captured a king and were putting him to death. The crowd gathered here would be ten times bigger

and much more unruly. This is no king. I look at him and find he is looking at me. I stop breathing for a moment. Such compassion in that look! I feel as if he really sees me. Then he looks away.

What just happened? My heart is racing as my mind grapples with those fleeting seconds in time. Who is he? How can he look at me, a stranger, for just moments in time and leave me feeling as if I have known him my whole life? I suddenly feel exposed standing on that hill. For all my gear as a soldier, I feel as if I am laid bare. It shakes me to the core and forces me to look at the man they have called king. With great effort, he is talking to one of the thieves hanging next to him. What is he saying? Are they words of compassion that match the gift he has just given me? Who is this man?

I want to draw closer. I find I want to hear him speak. I want to talk to those gathered at the foot of his cross. But I dare not move. I have a job to do. I have been assigned a post. Out of obedience, I stay where I am. But I long to be obedient to another and cannot even say from whence this desire comes. I have never questioned my call before. I am a soldier. *I am a soldier.* But today, the one with eyes of compassion has seen me as a man. He has seen me. Somehow, in the midst of his death, he has seen all of me.

I notice the sky is darkening in an eerie way. I look around, but there is no explanation. Only fear and anxiety. The religious leaders are hurrying away. I step toward the crosses. I know I am not supposed to leave my post, but I am drawn anyway. The darkness is deepening, the cries of the women intensify. But I stare at the man in the middle...the one who has seen me. Unbelievably, he raises his head and says to the sky "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." With that, his head falls forward and I know he is gone. The sadness overwhelms me and I find that I wish I could have gone with him. I say out loud what I am thinking, "Surely, this was a righteous man."

I stare at him on the cross and think...this man of compassion, the one who has seen me...I can follow this man.

Good Friday Witness

Joseph of Arimathea

by Sara Sosa

April 2014

My life is at risk. All that I have worked for, trained for, since a child is in the balance. Yet I cannot hide in the shadows any longer. I have been witness to the most heinous crime. No, not witness...participant. As a young Jewish scholar, never would I have imagined the word of the Lord to be so misused, so totally ignored. As I stand on this hill and watch the man I have come to believe is the Son of God struggle for his last breaths, I find my feet carefully stepping away from my colleagues. What was once a prestigious title for me...the culmination of all that my father wanted for me...tastes sour to me. I wish I could spit it out.

My eyes stay focused on the cross though I know that the rest of the leaders from the synagogue are preparing to leave. Their smugness rankles. I hear their pride, remember the insults they spat at him just hours earlier. My voice did not join theirs, but I am guilty by association. I want to rip this robe from my body. I am miserable. The man who was to be the savior of the world is close, oh so close, to death. He can save no one now. And I don't feel worthy of being saved.

There was a time, not too long ago, when I felt free. I felt on top of the world. I was respected. Important. People listened to my wise words and acted on them. I interpreted scripture for use in disputes...I interpreted the law. I enjoyed the benefits of my upbringing and studies. My knowledge of God's word was complete...nearly every word committed to memory. I was someone to be emulated. I looked good to the public eye. But I know now that it was a farce. I was nothing more than an empty shell, going through the motions that I had been taught, but not really engaging my faith.

Then my path crossed with Jesus. That encounter wrecked me for the job that I had come to love. Suddenly, the law that I had worked so hard to uphold didn't seem as important as mercy. Jesus taught me the power of love, of forgiveness, of walking in his footsteps. Still, I couldn't walk away from my life. I still haven't walked away. I am so at war with myself as I stare at the cross. The rest of the members of the Sanhedrin are leaving. They are unnerved by the increasing darkness in the middle of the day. I can feel that it means something, too. I should go. But my feet stay.

I see Jesus raise his head and speak to his mother. Selfishly, I wish he would speak to me. I need him to speak to me. I have failed in the worst way. I wish I were on that cross. I won't look away. It is so hard to watch, but it is the only way I can punish myself. I didn't speak for him when I could have. I didn't stop the injustice that nailed him where he is. I am a coward. My feet keep me rooted where I am.

Then he looks at me and I am astonished to receive what he has to give. He does not see me as he should. He does not see me the way I do. Instead he offers compassion. Mercy. Grace. Forgiveness. One by one, they roll over me, washing me from head to toe. His love makes me better than I really am. My knees buckle under the comprehension that Jesus sees me as I want to be...his follower.

I stumble forward and catch myself in time to see him look to the sky and say "It is finished." The truth of those words press into me. It really is finished. I thought I knew what freedom was, but what I experience now is so much more. It is finished. My betrayal of him is over. My guilt lifted. My shame

silenced. My emptiness filled. My identity recreated. I am his follower. I do not need to live the lie that has been my life.

Tears are streaming down my face. I realize that Jesus has died and in his death I have been given life. I know now what I will do to thank him. I will go to Pilate. I will ask for the privilege of removing Jesus' body from the cross and preparing it for burial. New life is coursing through my veins. I look across the crowd gathered and find there is one other who stands as I do...in awe of this collision of heaven and earth...Nicodemus. He looks at me and nods. I know I am not alone. He will join me as we honor the body of the one we took too long to serve.

But I serve him now. I am Joseph of Arimathea. I am a follower of Jesus.

Good Friday Witness

Mary Magdalen

by Sara Sosa

April 2013

The smell of the earth fills me as I kneel on the hillside. I had long ago stopped looking at him on the cross. The weight of it, my grief, my sorrow, the exhaustion living in my bones made it impossible to stand any longer. I sank to my knees and fell forward, face to the ground, hands grabbing fists full of dirt. With every ragged breath, I can smell earth.

My tears won't stop falling. I glance at his mother, so faithful in her prayers...she never takes her eyes from him. I'm not that strong. I have never been that strong...except for a brief moment when he restored my hope, when he gave me value, when his eyes and words showed me that I could be loved. I had hope then, but only agony now. He is dying...leaving. It hurts more than I would have imagined. It crushes my heart within my chest.

I try to raise my face to his. Just one last time to see him, to know him. But I am weak. I can't bear to look at him on that cross. All I can do is stare at the mud my tears create as they mingle with the earth. Then I hear his voice...quiet, strong...like him.

"It is finished."

The thought echoes through my head with lightning speed...

Finished

Complete

Done

Silenced

Over

Accomplished...

His words rattle my soul. My despair increases. I force myself to look up and see him just as his eyes see me. Without a word, I know there is more. His eyes remind me: I have value. I am loved. His words linger in my mind, travel to my heart. As his eyes close and his head slumps forward, I hear "It is finished" but I feel "It has begun..."

Good Friday Witness

Mary the Mother of Jesus

by Sara Sosa

April 2014

When I said yes, I was just a child. Eager to please. Easily connected to my faith in God. As a young girl, very little stood in the way of my seeing you, sensing your presence in my life, hearing your voice. You called me to an important task...one I would never have imagined would be mine. Looking back, I can't believe the time has gone so quickly. You threw me into controversy and I knew with you at my side, I could endure. I pray I have done well the task you asked of me.

But it is not over yet. Of all the trials this heart has had to survive, this is most certainly the hardest. I know he has asked you to let the cup pass from him. But that has not been your will. So I do not ask for this cup to pass from me, either. Even so, he is my son, too. You have watched him from afar for thirty three years. I have held him close. I know how his skin feels. I know what his laughter sounds like. I remember the smell of fresh air and sweat and little boy. I can almost recall it if I close my eyes.

But I will not close them. As long as he breathes, I will stand watch, though it is tearing me apart. At lightning speed, the memories come fast and furious: a newborn in a stall prepared for animals, an unexpected visit from far away kings, a frantic flight to Egypt, a young boy lost on our trip to Jerusalem...this mother holding him close through all of that. My arms ache to hold him.

Never have I questioned you and I struggle not to do so now. I am beyond thankful that your messenger did not reveal this plan when he arrived in my home all those years ago. His visit was disturbing and reassuring all at the same time. I remember feeling peaceful and wondering why I wasn't terrified. I find that I feel that same peace now even though my heart is breaking to watch him. I know I am not alone. My agony pales in comparison to yours.

His words from the cross have been so very hard to hear. He wonders why you have forsaken him. He entrusts me to the care of one of his closest earthly friends. He has blessed and welcomed a thief into his kingdom. His love is outrageous. His strength and singular focus so totally overwhelming. I see in him characteristics that must be yours alone. I have always seen that.

More memories press in...coming to the aid of the host of a wedding, patiently training and leading his group of twelve, restoring health and wholeness, walking on water, welcoming children, restoring the dignity of a woman who had none...she kneels in the dirt beside me now. And then there is Lazarus. Who cannot but follow him after such a display of kingdom authority?

Kingdom authority. That is what is happening now, isn't it? Your kingdom...your authority...meeting my broken and needy earth. The cries from a week ago echo through my mind. Hosanna...Save us.

You have darkened the sky and the earth has begun to tremble. I know you are here, though I cannot see you. I wish I could see you though I know it would destroy me to do so. I know your messengers are here, too, though I cannot see them either. Though my eyes cannot perceive the heavenly realm, I know it is here. I can see it on the face of my son. He knows you are near.

God in heaven, I have done what you asked of me. With all that I am, I have loved him with a mother's love...all the while knowing he was never really mine. In this moment, I am glad he is yours because you can redeem him from the agony of this crucifixion. From his words, I know he understands you must look the other way. But that is a place in which I can stand. I can continue to look, to watch, to love while you must suspend your love for the briefest of moments. I will keep watch for both of us until the moment when he passes from this world and from my embrace into yours. Father, into your hands I commend his spirit.