

Beyond – Beyond Crucifixions

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Introduction

Good morning to all of you on this first Sunday after Easter - after Resurrection Sunday. The Lord is risen indeed.

I want to express my appreciation for the theme which led us to Easter – “Deep calls to deep”. Thanks to our pastors, our preaching team, our worship committee, our worship leaders, and song leaders, and preachers, and story tellers – and digital ushers - who filled that theme with so much depth and so much power.

Today we begin a new theme – Beyond – Beyond what? It is a rather provocative theme. Today I want to take us “Beyond - crucifixions”. Yes, plural. Crucifixions. I want to do so by telling the stories of four of the Biblical characters who lived through the crucifixion of Jesus, and through their own pain and despair, to give us resurrection hope. I will do this in the form of 4 monologues. I want to identify with these characters and learn from them.

1: Beyond – disillusionment – The story of Cleopas (Luke 24: 13-35)



I, Cleopas, was disillusioned, shattered, broken. I had been...taken in. Maybe it was all too good to be true. It was wonderful while it lasted. This Jesus seemed to be a prophet, powerful in word and in deed. We saw him standing before God – and all the people. We had so hoped that he was the one who would redeem all of Israel. It was wonderful to

be with him. We were so enthralled, so hopeful, so sure he was the special one sent from God.

Now, all gone. All gone. That false dream is gone, dissipated in disillusionment. Our chief priests, our rulers, handed him over to the Romans. And they, those Romans, crucified him. Hung him on that cross until he was dead. Dead. All our hopes gone. There is nothing left.

Except maybe for the rumours. The rumours fed by some of our women. Only rumours. These women said that they had gone to the tomb early on Sunday morning – but

didn't find the body – the body of Jesus. Wasn't there - they said. Some fantasy about a vision – a vision of angels. Angels who said that Jesus was alive. They even said that some of our male companions, on hearing their story, went to the tomb - and they also found it empty.

I, Cleopas, was just – skeptical. Yes, skeptical. The story is just not believable.

But then, my wife and I were walking to the town of Emmaus – about 7 miles from Jerusalem. We were talking about all these things, all these things which made no sense, all these rumours and stories and tales impossible even to imagine. Beyond belief. Nothing penetrated our despair.

A stranger joined us. We didn't know who he was. Maybe we should have known. But we were too deep in our despair. He joined us. Entered into our conversation – conversation about all of those awful events, and crazy rumours of the last few days. We chided that stranger. I, Cleopas, challenged him by asking him if he was the only visitor in Jerusalem who had heard nothing about all that had just transpired there – the awful crucifixion, the rumours.

But then he challenged us – confronted us, really. “How foolish you are”, he said, “how slow of heart you are to believe all that our prophets have spoken, prophets who have said that the Christ must suffer all these things that have happened”. He even went right to the beginning of our scriptures, to the story of Moses, and other prophets, and explained what this all meant. And still, and still, we didn't understand. Maybe we couldn't understand. We were too broken, too disillusioned.

As we approached Emmaus, our home village, this stranger kept walking on. He did what custom suggests. And we did what custom demands. It is understood, in our culture, that if you engage with a stranger, you invite the stranger to a meal. That's what you do. And it is custom for the stranger to keep walking, not to assume an invitation. Well, the social niceties were met. We invited. He accepted.

But there was something more than only custom and tradition going on here, the polite social niceties of superficially inviting the stranger we had walked with to stay for dinner, hoping, maybe expecting him, to decline. Within us we felt something that was, well, beyond just custom. We urged him strongly. We felt deep inside of us that we needed to continue the conversation. This stranger who was enthralling us said “yes”.

But then he did something very unusual. He, our guest, picked up the bread. He picked up the bread and said, “Peace be with you”. Our guest picked up the bread and broke it for distribution. Shouldn't I, the host, have done that? But our guest picked up the bread. He blessed the bread, and broke it, and gave it to us. It was only then that we finally recognized who he was - who our guest was. Our eyes were opened. That blessing, that blessing of the bread opened our eyes. We finally saw the reality. It was the risen Jesus.

And then he was gone. Gone. But our hearts just burned within us. That same hour - it was already dark outside - that same hour we got up from the table and hurried to return to Jerusalem. There we found the eleven – those who were closest to Jesus – the eleven because Judas, the betrayer was not there. And the eleven, assured us that Jesus was risen indeed, and that he had appeared to Simon. And then we told them what had happened on our journey, and in our home – how we had recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

It was then, it was then while we were talking about all this, that Jesus himself stood among us - stood right there with us – and said to us all, “Peace be with you”. “Peace be with you”. At first, we were startled, terrified, really. We thought we might be seeing a ghost.

“Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and feet. See that it is I myself. Touch me and see...”

We were, how can I express it, we were that mixture of, that confusion of, joy and disbelieving, and wondering. Yes, that’s it. Confusion and disbelieving and joy all mixed together.

After he was gone, after he had blessed us, and after he was carried to heaven, we just worshipped him. We felt so much joy. We spent so much time in the temple blessing God.

Beyond disillusionment, maybe beyond belief, but hearts full of joy.

2) Beyond Despair – Judas (Matthew 27:1-10)



My name is forever - forever – cursed. “Judas the betrayer” “Judas betrayed Jesus”. I will never, ever, live that down. I betrayed Jesus.

The story that Cleopas just told – about the “eleven” who were gathered. Eleven, when we were twelve disciples of Jesus. I was that twelfth one. I was the one missing. I was the one who wasn’t there. I was the one who had betrayed Jesus.

Even now I am not sure whether I really meant to hand Jesus over to that armed mob. I did, of course. I admit it. The chief priests offered me those 30 pieces of silver to do it. For someone who was poor like me that was an incredible amount of money. And I did take it, I won’t deny it. But I’m still not sure whether the bribe of money was what made me do it.

I even arranged a hidden signal to let that mob of thugs sent there by the chief priests and elders know whom they should arrest. A kiss. A kiss. An act of love. Or an act of betrayal. I approached Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi". And then I kissed him. The inevitable happened. They seized Jesus, led him away to his trial. And they crucified Jesus. It was my doing. I confess it. I did it. I kissed him and betrayed him.

Did I know what I was doing? Even now I don't really know. One huge part of my motivation was that I was becoming, well, sort of disillusioned. I really was expecting Jesus to somehow make a big move to start bringing in the Kingdom of God – like in overthrowing the corrupt religious leaders – the big shots – the chief priests and the temple crooks. Our world was crying out for change, for renewal, for justice – And that was only our Jewish world. Then there were the Romans, the brutal, hellish Romans. I was getting terribly impatient.

One part of me hoped, prayed, that Jesus would be the one to finally change things – dramatically forcefully, change our corrupt and violent world. And I didn't see that happening. I didn't see Jesus take any concrete steps to bring in that desperately needed revolution.

I think a part of me, that desperate part of me, thought that I could provoke Jesus to finally be that real Messiah which we so badly needed – the Messiah who would bring in the Kingdom of God. Jesus, the Messiah who would now overthrow both our oppressive Roman masters and our corrupt religious leaders.

So, I betrayed my master, my friend. I kissed Jesus. And he was taken. And he didn't fight back like I expected him too. He didn't call his legions of angels to destroy our enemies. In fact, when he was being seized and arrested, one of our company, Peter, I think, did finally draw his sword, and struck the servant of the high priest and sliced off his ear. Finally, some action. Finally. But then Jesus said, "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matthew 26: 52). I was disillusioned. Disillusioned by Jesus. I betrayed him. And he did nothing.

When they condemned Jesus, I was filled with remorse. Deep remorse. I tried to return those 30 pieces of silver to the high priests. I said, "I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood". "What's that to us", they replied. That's your responsibility".

I threw the money into the temple and left. I went from there and hanged myself. Now there were only the eleven. Eleven, not twelve.

What I couldn't even have imagined, not in my wildest imagination, was that there would be a resurrection, a whole new beginning, the very revolution that I had hoped for and prayed for. But this was a revolution of love and of loving. And I missed it. And yet, dare I think that God's mercy will extend to me also?

3) Beyond the demons – Mary Magdalene (John 20: 11-18)



Your Scriptures identify me as Mary of Magdala (Magdala was my home village). They also name me as the one who was demon possessed – possessed by 7 terrible demons. I admit, that until I met Jesus, I felt as if there was not much left of me, the one God supposedly created good. It was others who named my brokenness “demon

possession”. I just felt a kind of inner paralysis. I could not move beyond the words that were hurled at me—“you are evil, you are not worthy to be here.” I felt overpowered by images from my past; overpowered by the violence I had experienced, overpowered by the relentless trauma that would not go away. Whatever name you give it, I was deeply ostracized by my fellow villagers. No one wanted to come close to me - lest these demons also overpower them. I was an outcast.

Demons. Your world has other names, I think, psychological names. Depression, psychoses, PTSD - whatever. I had been emotionally traumatized. But I did not choose the demons; they came from somewhere else! And they just tormented me. Of course, in our world, I was shunned. You didn’t mess with evil spirits, whatever they are. So, I was shocked that Jesus didn’t shun me, didn’t turn away, that he allowed me to come as close as I did.

I do have a bone to pick with how history has told my story. Men wrote my story. Men. How would they understand what was happening inside of me? Or even how they contributed to the trauma I was feeling. Over the centuries since, I have been pictured as everything from a wanton prostitute to a revered saint. But mostly I carry these labels - “Seven demons”. “Seven evil spirits”.

And then I met Jesus – or was it Jesus meeting me? And he didn’t turn and run away. He actually spoke to me. He seemed to look deep into my soul – and didn’t run away in revulsion. I felt his acceptance. I felt his compassion. I felt his understanding. Everyone else spurned me, tried to keep their distance from me. I accepted that. After all, they called me “demon possessed”, and how could I refute that. I was always the outsider, the one shunned, the one “driven away”. The one unworthy.

I felt deep compassion from Jesus, an acceptance as a child of God, one worthy of attention and love. I don’t know if he “drove out the demons”, as your scriptures name it? All I know is that I – felt better, felt accepted, felt loved. And I joined that small group of women who wanted to stay close to Jesus – women like Salome and Mary, the mother of James, and Joana, and Chuza, and Susanna – now all friends (Luke 8: 2-3). They too accepted me – maybe

because their master, Jesus, accepted me. I felt, for the first time in my life, that I actually “belonged”.

The twelve, the so called twelve male disciples of Jesus, mostly accepted us. We did after all, provide for them out of our resources – food, sometimes even money (Mark 15:40-41, Luke 8:1-3). Sometimes we did feel the impatience of those 12 males when Jesus spoke to us rather than only to them. When we tried to show our love to Jesus we were sometimes misinterpreted, and at times I almost felt retraumatized. But they did seem to mostly welcome us as we together followed Jesus around the countryside. Those were good days, days of fuller inner healing, days of feeling, well accepted.

And then – then everything came crashing down in one awful moment. The Romans took him and killed him. They took Jesus and crucified him. Hung him on that dammed cross until he was dead. Dead. Gone forever. Everything gone again. Our lives, our dreams, our hopes, our joys – all crushed.

And so it was, that on the Sabbath morning, deep in grief and despair, I went to the tomb while it was still dark – went there to weep out the last of my dry tears. And his body wasn’t there. Stolen. Further demoralization. I heard someone – I assumed the voice of the gardener – ask me, “Woman, why are you weeping”. Deeper despair. Why am I weeping? Because my world has been destroyed, that’s why. “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him”. Again, the voice, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for”? I assumed it was the gardener. “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him...”

And then, and then, I heard my name, my name - called. “Mary” - said the voice. And then I knew. Then I knew. It was Jesus. *I was the first to receive that good news. And with it the commission to tell the other followers that Jesus was arisen.* I the woman forever associated with seven demons, was chosen to be the bearer of the fantastic news of his resurrection to the 11 disciples – and to the whole world. I ran to tell the other disciples. I shouted out to them - “I have seen the Lord”. (John 2:1-18).

I, Mary Magdalene, felt free at last.

4) Beyond doubt – Thomas (John 20: 24:29)

I can live with that – with that appendage to my name. “Doubting Thomas”. Forever known as doubting Thomas. Is it really so bad to be known as someone who “doubts”? By the way, the Gospel writer John, who recorded my story so fully didn’t use the word “doubt”. If you would know your Greek, you would know that John uses the Greek word “apistos” which means “unbelieving”. It does not mean “doubting”. Does it really matter? Maybe not. Unbelieving. I, Thomas, can’t just take someone else’s word for something so, so life changing.



Mind you, I'm not really totally upset that you all call me doubting Thomas. I even take a bit of pride in that. Well, maybe I do mind a bit. But I admit, there has always been that sceptical part in my psych - that part which looks for evidence, for that which I can see with my own eyes and understand in my own head. I don't know if I need proof so much – much in life can't be easily proved, especially when it comes to what you believe and

whom you trust. But I have always looked for evidence, for more than only hearsay. I have always asked a lot of questions. My friends say I push the boundaries too much. "Why can't you just accept things", they say.

Let me ask you a question. When you, in the 20th century read "doubting Thomas", what do you experience? What emotion happens in your heart? Do you hear "How can a person who walked with Jesus have so little faith"? Or does your heart say, "Thomas is really pushing to the heart of the matter. I too would have done that".

Never mind my ramblings. The thing is, I wasn't there that first time Jesus showed himself to my friends after his crucifixion. I had missed it. I wasn't there when Mary Magdalene told my friends that she had seen her Lord – her risen Lord. I wasn't there when the other disciples met together behind locked doors because they were so afraid of the authorities. They told me later that Jesus had shown them his pierced hands and side. I wasn't there. So, when I did meet my friends, I just said that "unless I too see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe". Does that forever make me "doubting Thomas"? The others had already seen what I too needed to see.

A week later I did join my friends behind those locked doors. And that's when I saw Jesus. He knew what I needed. He said, so gently, "Thomas, put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Be ready to believe". That was just what I needed. "I blurted out, "My Lord and my God". Jesus honoured my questioning.

Three times, altogether, our risen Lord came among us. Three times (John 21:14). And then he was gone, ascended to heaven.

And I am thrilled to be able to tell you my story, and our story – Hear this from Your questioning, but believing, Thomas. Jesus, our Lord and our God.

That is the heart of my story. Just for your sake I will sign off these ramblings - "Doubting Thomas". Doubting Thomas who is now "believing Thomas.

A concluding reflection

I, Gary Harder, a follower of Jesus these many centuries later, ponder these stories now told, wondering where my identification lies – wonderings complicated enormously by this pandemic we are all trying to survive.

One part of me rages in anger at the immense social inequities now exposed by the virus - exposed for all to see. The horrible state of many of our for-profit senior homes. All the deep racism embedded in how our society functions. All the inequities that are inflicted on our poor communities – even now being overlooked in our vaccination protocols.

Will I, will we, now have the courage to face these ongoing crucifixions head on? Will our society actually do the heavy work of addressing these injustices? Are we ready to identify with the disillusionment, and pain and anger the disposed in our world are feeling? Are we ready to face the crucifixion's going on in our world?

But I suspect that my raging - our raging - might be rather futile. Most of us – most certainly I – have very little impact beyond our rather small world. But then, Cleopas and Mary Magdalene, and Thomas didn't set out to change the world. They simply proclaimed the resurrection – they simply told the story of Jesus. And that was enough. And that did change the world. Each of them struggled with the story. Each of them broke under the strain. But each of them witnessed to how God works in our world.

Then there is Judas who did try to change the world as he saw it – assuming that an armed insurrection was needed. But his way failed. So much to ponder.

My conviction is that It is the story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus which does change the world. It's a story which challenges me to love rather than to hate, to see the image of God in everyone I encounter, to look for signs of hope and love and new life and new possibilities everywhere. I look for resurrection everywhere, maybe especially in these covid times.

Yes, I too get disillusioned, and feel despair, and feel broken inside, and get angry and know pessimism and see way too many crucifixions in our world. But I am feeling more hopeful recently. Change is happening. A momentum is building to address the injustices and inequities in our society. The raw exposure of racism and societal abuses by this pandemic can no longer be hidden. They are being exposed – exposed for healing.

I want to join together with all of you, and with everyone who is working for systemic change, and inclusion, and new life.

I do believe in resurrection. I do believe in resurrection. Amen.

