

Resurrection of Our Lord
Luke 23.50-24.11
April 8, 2007
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

When we say someone is a **follower**, it's usually not a compliment. At times, though, we **all** follow others for various reasons.... There's certainly plenty of following going on in the Holy Week/Easter story that St. Luke tells.

When the Last Supper was over, St. Luke says that Jesus:

... went... to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples **followed** him.
(Luke 22.39)

Disciple **means** follower, so saying that "the disciples followed him" is almost a stutter. To be a successful disciple one **must** follow, and they did, to that place which is also called the Garden of Gethsemane. It's a park-like setting where Jesus and His friends loved to spend time; that's how Judas knew where to lead the chief priests and elders who wanted to arrest Him. On that night before His death, Jesus had led the disciples there not for a brisk walk to help digest their meal, but for prayer. They fell asleep on Him instead.... We might assume their eyelids were heavy because their stomachs were full, but St. Luke says, "...they slept for grief."

Sorrow was near indeed. Jesus' disciples awoke to the nightmare of a crowd of Temple police surrounding them, and Jesus being bound. The story continues:

...they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was **following** at a distance. (Luke 22.54)

Peter was still tracing Jesus' steps. The difference is that although Peter was following, Jesus was no longer in the lead; He was now being led.

After Peter's three-fold denial of the Lord, St. Luke says, "He went out and wept bitterly." We don't know if Peter then dropped out of sight or followed Jesus again from the high priest's house to Pilate's headquarters to Herod's palace and back to Pilate again.

We do know that when Jesus stumbled out of Pilate's place after being flogged, when He began to walk the sorrowful way to Calvary, the one who **followed** immediately behind him was the out of town visitor conscripted to carry His cross: Simon of Cyrene. He **followed** Jesus, dragging along the crossbar on which Jesus would be nailed, because he **had** to, or risk suffering the same fate.

Many other folks also **followed** Jesus' torturous path that day. St. Luke reports:

A great number of the people **followed** him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. (Luke 23.27)

Since the women were crying they were motivated by more than idle curiosity. They cared about this man's suffering. I don't know if these were people who knew and loved him as an individual or whose hearts simply broke that **any** human being would be treated in such a way. In any case, their following was a dogging of His footsteps, not necessarily a sharing of His vision of the kingdom of God.

There definitely **was** a group, though, who **followed** out of understanding and love. St. Luke says that after Jesus died, the crowd dispersed, some of those women still beating their breasts. But this was:

...while all his acquaintances, including the women who had **followed** him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.(Luke 23.49)

These were the ones who had left behind whatever they were doing before they met Jesus, and emptied their wallets and walked far from home to **follow** Him, body and soul. Having come this far, they followed him to the site of crucifixion, and lingered after He had breathed His last breath. I'm guessing they experienced **grief** that He was dead and **relief** that He no longer suffered. Maybe they stayed because they were paralyzed and couldn't move. More likely they stayed to keep vigil and be sure no further harm came to their Master's earthly remains.

Who knows how much later, but a while after the crowd left a man appeared. He approached the cross, reverently it seemed, and somehow lowered the body of Jesus, wrapped it in a linen cloth and bundled it away.

Who **was** this man?? He was Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin who had **not** agreed that Jesus was trouble, who had **not** voted to ask Pontius Pilate to put Him to death. St. John's Gospel says that he:

...was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews. (John 19.38)

Remember, a disciple is literally a **follower**? Here was a public leader who was a secret **follower**! Easy for us to say Joseph of Arimathea lacked courage to declare his beliefs openly. But look what God did, even and especially through this secret **follower**...

The Romans did not release the bodies of people they executed to family members or **followers**. They were afraid the criminal would be transformed into a martyr and trouble would be multiplied. Pontius Pilate probably would not have allowed Mary, the mother of Jesus, or any of the apostles to claim Jesus' body. They were nobodies except for their too-close relationship to the deceased. Joseph of Arimathea, however, was a respected member of the community, probably a wealthy man if he was rich enough to own a fresh tomb, part of the establishment, with no known connections to the one who had been executed. He asked for Jesus' body and Pilate gave it. Joseph of Arimathea may have been the **only** one who could have successfully petitioned Pontius Pilate for that privilege.... See how God writes straight with crooked lines?? Even though Joseph's secrecy was rooted in fear, it helped to accomplish God's purpose.

This was the man the women saw touch their Lord's body with tenderness and respect. Of course they wanted to know what Jesus' final resting place would be, so, as St. Luke says:

The women who had come with him from Galilee **followed** and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. (Luke 23.55)

You heard the story: they rested on the Sabbath and returned Sunday morning to find an empty tomb and an angel asking:

Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.
(Luke 24.5)

Those women who had **followed** Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem to Calvary to the garden on Easter morning weren't told to tell anyone anything; but they did. They were true disciples, sharing the Good News with all they met. Can we also say that **we** are followers, disciples, in deed and not just in name? Who are **we** like? Do we "follow" Jesus like Simon of Cyrene who was **forced** to? Did somebody have their hand in the small of your back this morning, **pushing** you in this direction ☺? Or are you like the devoted women and Peter? Did you once walk beside Him, though you now follow from a distance? Or are you like Joseph of Arimathea who believed in his heart but kept his opinions to himself out of fear? Who are you like and who would you **like** to be like?? God used them all. God can use you, too. Be proud to be a close follower of our crucified and risen Lord! Christ is risen, alleluia! He is risen indeed, alleluia!

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham