

“Woman, Behold thy Son”

John 19:26-27

Asbury United Methodist Church

April 3, 2026 (Good Friday)

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When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

When we allow ourselves to sit at the foot of the cross, watching Jesus endure pain and humiliation, our eyes fill with tears and our hearts with anguish. And if that is *our* experience, we can only imagine what it was like for Jesus’ mother to watch her son suffer. There is perhaps nothing harder than watching one’s children when they hurt and there’s nothing you can do to take away the pain. Parents who have watched a son or daughter endure illness or surgery or even death know the agony that accompanies the love of a mother or father for a suffering child.

It was the depth of a mother’s love that drove Mary to the foot of the cross that dark day, where she watched her beloved son in his dying hours. Mary was the only person who had been with Jesus from conception and birth to death. She alone had received the word of the angel Gabriel: “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

I wonder if Mary thought about that as she stood on Golgotha that day. I wonder if she tried to make sense of what she had heard from the angel in light of what she was watching unfold right before her eyes. Because what she saw didn’t look

like greatness. It looked like defeat. If her heart was breaking because her son was dying, it may also have been breaking because she had lost hope. She had no way of knowing how the angel's words would be fulfilled. On that dark day, Mary's thoughts were not about resurrection, but about death – the impending death of her son – the death of her hope that he would be the one to claim the throne of David.

And what were Jesus' thoughts in those agonizing hours? Tonight we have a glimpse into what he was thinking, as we reflect on his last words. We see that even in the face of evil, his heart was full of forgiveness for his enemies. We see that his forgiveness extended to the criminal hanging on the cross alongside his. And now we see that even in this time of physical and emotional pain and anguish, Jesus was thinking about his mother and what would happen to her after his death.

It is likely that Mary's husband, Joseph, an older man at the time of their marriage, was deceased by the time of Jesus' crucifixion. In that case, it would have fallen on Jesus, her eldest son, to make sure she was taken care of – that she was provided security and protection in her latter years. Caring for widows was (and still is) an important obligation in the Jewish community. But what would happen after Jesus' death? We might have expected that he would entrust her care to one of his brothers, but that's not what he did. We can't be sure why. In the Gospel of John, his brothers are consistently portrayed as *not* understanding or supporting Jesus' ministry. At the time of the crucifixion, as far as we can tell, they were not Jesus' disciples. So maybe that's the reason. We do know that they were conspicuously absent at the foot of the cross.

Instead, Jesus entrusted Mary to someone who shared his calling, his community, and his understanding of God's work in the world – his best friend, John, also known as the "Beloved Disciple." From the cross, Jesus formed a family not based on blood but on discipleship, as he said "Woman, behold your son," and then, to his friend John, "Behold your mother."

This is not just about the home and family that Mary would need after her son's death. This is theological. This is about the birth of the beloved community. This is a picture of the church in miniature. Jesus gives Mary a home within the community shaped by his love, not simply within the household of kinship. Jesus is not rejecting his family of origin, but rather is expanding it. "Care for one another as I have cared for you," he is saying. "Let love, not just blood, be the bond that unites you." In that moment, a new family was born – a family woven together by the crucified Christ.

The implications for us are profound. As we know, and to our sorrow, biological families aren't always the sacred spaces God intends. Families sometimes are held together by *transactional* "love." You do what I say and I'll love you. You think like I do and I'll love you. Transactional love is love that operates like an exchange. It's love with conditions, expectations, and scorekeeping. It's love that depends on performance, usefulness, or compliance. In other words, it's love that functions like a contract rather than a gift.

But the love of God, made known in the sacrificial death of Jesus, is indeed a gift. We can't earn it, but we receive it with grateful hearts. And then, loved beyond measure, we spread that love to others. We care for one another in good times and in bad; we provide for one another's needs; we pray for one another; we extend the love we have received not just to others in the community of faith, but to the world around us, remembering God's love for all creation.

Mary's grief must have been palpable that dark day as Rome did its best to get rid of Jesus. And grief is still with us, as we contemplate the ways the powers of the empire oppose the way and Spirit of Jesus in our own time and place. Sometimes our grief is overt, as we watch bombs kill children at school and United States citizens murdered by government agents; sometimes it is less obvious but just as real, as we grieve the loss

of human kindness – as day after day we see the most vulnerable among us dismissed as unworthy.

As we stand at the foot of the cross this dark and difficult day, Jesus sees our grief and entrusts us to one another, saying “Beloved, behold one another. Be family to one another. Love one another as I have loved you.”

May we recommit ourselves this day to being part of the community of faith where no one is left alone in suffering, in grief, in vulnerability. May we truly be the family that Jesus calls into being from the cross. Scripture tells us that *God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*¹ As members of the divine family, may we join together in bringing God’s salvation to the world, one act of entrusted love at a time.

Let the people say, Amen.

¹ John 3:17