

John Kelman

"There Stood by the Cross
of Jesus His Mother"

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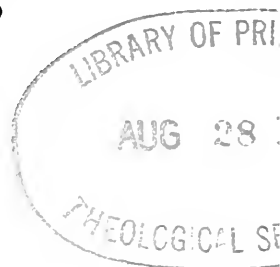


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A SERMON

Delivered in the
Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church
New York City
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By the Pastor, the
REV. JOHN KELMAN
D.D.

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John Kelman, D.D.

“There Stood by the Cross of Jesus His Mother”

By REV. JOHN KELMAN, D.D.

“*There Stood by the Cross of Jesus His Mother*”—John 19 : 25

THE cross was the most horrible mystery that ever darkened the face of the sun upon the earth; the blackest tragedy, human or divine, that ever tortured man’s wildest imagination. It leads us clean out beyond the range of all that a man may think or say, beyond his imagination and beyond his tears, into a world in which no one can possibly be at home. The homeless dreariness of the outer dark, the final desolation of the spirit, is upon Christ and all who stand beside Him there; and right into the midst of it there comes this human touch which forever relieves it all.

When Jesus was a little boy He used to climb the hill at the back of Nazareth, far up among the mountains of Galilee, and from that slight eminence, looking north in the clear morning or evening light, He saw the far-flung white line of the great road that ran from Ptolemais (Acre) on the Mediterranean to the Furthest East. He saw long strings of camels, swinging along, with their burdens of spices and rich cloths of silk and gold, from the East to the western markets, passing other trains of camels equally long which bore from the Phenician seaports of Tyre and Sidon the whole merchandise of the Mediterranean to the distant Eastern bazaars. On a frosty

morning He might hear, down to the south of Him, the clank of iron upon stone, when the Roman garrison changed guard, or when a centurion marched his company along the Roman paved road that connected Capernaum with the Sea. That was far below Him on the level plain of Esdraelon, a plain whose very color suggested blood, and which even in His day was the most famous battleground in all the world. In this way we see how, even at Nazareth from His earliest childhood, He was hemmed in, as it were, by the ideals of the world's merchandise and the world's militarism—by commerce and by war.

Now, while He was dying (if indeed the site of Calvary be that to which popular imagination has turned of late), there were on either side of the little hill two great roads leading northward out of Jerusalem. On the northern side of the hill they joined and became one, but Calvary separated their branches. Again, one was the road of commerce, while the other was reserved for the march of soldiers. It was as if those great jaws of commerce and of war, between which Nazareth lay in His childhood, had closed in upon Him now in His latest hour like some mighty vice. The things that had troubled His childhood and perplexed it were now crucifying Him. The commerce and the warfare of the world, its financial and its military glories, were murdering Him Whom in His childhood they had astonished. Thus the thoughts of Nazareth linked themselves on with the facts of Calvary, and He understood the weird development of His life in terms of these two roads.

But when Mary came and stood before that low cross of His, she brought to His dying heart another set of memories from Nazareth. There, when He was a very little boy, before even the two roads had got upon His imagination, He had gone daily to the village well, hand in hand with her. Now that she came back to Him in His last hour, the tenderness of the old familiarity returned to temper the agony of His crucifixion, and to give to Him in His loneliness a gentle companion. She too was there, caught like Himself between the great jaws of military and commercial cruelty, whose vice-like grasp was slaying Him. She was there. And as His dying eyes closed in weariness He could feel again the touch of her hand in His, and tread again the little pathway to the village well.

All this throws a light of its own upon the meaning of this awful yet familiar scene. Mary is not merely the one woman who was so dear to His childhood in the northern village. She stands for human life and all its common love and sorrow. Our question, on this day which men celebrate as Good Friday in every land, is how to relate that common life with Calvary, how to understand the relation of the dying Christ to our human experience. Let us express this in two aspects.

1. What Jesus did for Mary.
2. What Mary did for Jesus.

1. *What Jesus did for Mary.* In thinking of this we must remember that it was not Mary alone who stood there. (1) *All womanhood* stood beneath the

cross of Jesus and found itself that day. All its mystery and reticence, its shy unexamined and unconfessed instincts, were revealed to its own heart in the light of His dying love. All poorer and cheaper elements dropped away from it, all the littleness of envy and jealousy and gossip and self-importance and interference, such as had been sometimes associated with other incidents in her life, these dropped away. Only love was left, the deepest thing and the most precious in all the world, the love of a woman's heart. Looking back from whatever future day upon that scene, she saw her true self there without any of life's alloy upon it, in a constant vision that nothing in all the remaining years could ever change. She saw herself as she stood at His cross. She, Mary of Nazareth, literally found herself that day. Henceforth the only thing that was worth striving for was that which she had discovered in herself then. As she stood then so must she try to be to the end of her earthly life, a spirit named and known only by its loyalty and its love, a woman's heart set in the holy place where all meaner things had fallen away from it. This she must ever strive to be.

What more than this could Jesus have done for Mary or for womanhood? What greater gift could He have given to us all than to strip from us everything that could make us ashamed to look back? Today we too stand at the cross and discover our real selves. No meaner or poorer element has any place here, and we gladly let all such things drop away from us. Henceforth we shall remember ourselves

at our very best, in the character that we dared unashamed to bring to Calvary. We shall cherish that as our true heritage of life, the ideal of us which it is life's whole business to change into the real.

(2) *All bereavement* stood there and found itself. For bereavement also has its meaner side. We all know how sore a trial it puts upon character. There is the sudden, disintegrating shock; the desperate, vain rebellion; the slowly growing persuasion that life is over and done with now; the sense of one's heart withering into deadness; the tasteless duties that weary the spirit without interesting or exciting it. Occasional longings of the stricken heart break into feverish and intermittent passion, and are succeeded by a recoil that sends us back into a mood in which nothing seems to be worth while.

All this Mary brought to Jesus as He hung there upon His cross, and His love for her shows most tender and pathetic in the simplicity of His consideration, and the fullness of His understanding of these commonplace elements in sorrow. His love restored for her the balance of things and of their values. The thought of that most desperate hour henceforth and forever would have His love—His simple, understanding love—as part of its meaning. So the savorless life regained its interest and its poignancy, not in itself but for His sake Who had met her there. **The eyes of Jesus will haunt the loneliness of this woman's life, and her sorrow will be taken up with her love of Him, into the divine and eternal life in which she also shall have part.**

Thus, in the person of Mary, there stood beneath

the cross of Jesus all human love and all human sorrow on that strange day. As they stood then before Him, He let the power of His cross play full upon them, the power of His dying love. None of them can ever be secular again, however much it may have seemed God-forsaken in the past. Both love and sorrow have seemed to divide our hearts many times from their allegiance to holy things, but this can never be again. These also are holy, and we shall not slander them any more by calling them common, far less unclean. Thus a new holiness falls upon our earthly love and sorrow, as if some rays of light from the dwelling-place of angels had penetrated to them and transformed them. Thus all our human experience is measured by the cross. The cross is indeed the measure of the world, and it tells us that these ordinary things—the love of fellow-mortals, the loyalty to friends, the grief that breaks our hearts—these things are bigger and holier and grander than we had ever taken them for. As we walk among them once again, a new reverence for the common life of the world will come upon us, and a new sacredness in quiet days and hours. This is what Jesus did for Mary.

2. *What Mary did for Jesus.* Of course the thing that brought her there primarily was just what every woman knows, a passionate longing to be of use to the suffering and the dying. She little dreamed of how much use she was. Did you ever think of the dire temptation that the cross of Calvary must have brought to Christ? The early temptations were

but child's play compared to this. Think of that pure soul with all the fastidiousness of God in it, the moral fastidiousness to which sin is pain and defilement, nailed up against the filthy tree of sin. The treachery of traitors, the stupid barbarity of foreigners, the cowardice of friends, surrounded Him. He was crucified among hypocrites and thieves, among shouting fools and pagan soldiers.

There must have been two ways in which the tempter thrust sore at Him that day, and the fate of the world hung upon His treatment of these. First, He might easily have become embittered. Impatience and discouragement might well have led to a sense of disillusionment which would have repudiated all that had gone before it leading to the cross. Was it indeed for this that He had lived and been ready to die—for this? It is hardly possible that He could have escaped, in the agony of His flesh, some temptation to surrender His life-long hope and faith in men. So He might have confessed that, after all, the world with its sin was conqueror; and that His dreams and ideals had gone down the stream of that black flood of failure and perdition which was now pouring over its final cataract into defeat and death. So He might have crept into death, defeated and a conscious failure.

Or, on the other hand, He might have been simply angry, and He would have "done well to be angry." It would have been a righteous anger that indignantly scorned a world so unfit for Him. Who could have complained if He had drawn off in resentment from this most outrageous act of mankind? He had

nothing in common with so desperate a world. Let Him proudly gather His robe about Him, and withdraw, and leave it to its fate. That may have been implied in the words He Himself has told us, showing that it had actually occurred to Him that He might have prayed His Father and received as escort a guard of twelve legions of angels, to protect Him from the scorn and brutality of these most miserable of men.

On the cross He resisted all this and fought it off. He believed in spite of all the enemies of faith. He loved in spite of hatred, and forgave the world with His dying breath. Surely we cannot but believe that Mary's presence there helped Him in that victory. The hands that had caressed Him long ago were now clasped in agony at His feet. He felt again the touch of her fingers upon His matted hair. The old loyalties and the simple childish things came back across the years to comfort Him, and a touch of home came to visit Him on the homeless cross. Yes, the world held this also—the mad, raging, wicked world. All that Nazareth had ever been to Him was still part of the truth of things. The mother's presence helped Him, in that last deadly struggle, to keep hold upon His faith in life. It is indeed a wicked world, yet there is love in it, and no pure human heart has ever loved in vain.

Ah, yes, that simple human tenderness did much for Calvary. But not only did it bring comfort to Jesus in His hour of agony: it brings light to us all in our interpretation of the deed that was done there. In our handling of the doctrine of the atonement

nothing is easier than to let it become a mere hard intellectual proposition, a thing of official relations and deeds. So it becomes ghastly and repels men who try to believe it. It drives into an unsympathetic and arid theological controversy those whose breaking hearts would fain flee to a crucified friend. Here is a touch which shows us the atonement in the light of mother-love, a thing we can all understand quite well. He, hanging there, is still touched with the feeling of all that makes up life's affections. All that we can find in His heart is simply love, and the love that existed between Him and His mother stands as a natural type of all His love. Herein is love indeed, and when we see it reflected in her eyes we know it well.

Oh, brothers and sisters, consider this new meaning in the cross. The highest mysteries of our faith are very simple things which little children and all the hearts that love can understand, for in our degree we know it by experience. Have we not all been tortured? Is there not a cross set up for everyone of us? In all our lives there is sin, and the shame and remorse of sin to torment us. In all our love there is pain lurking somewhere. And here, in the simplicity of this stupendous event, mother and Son look simply into one another's eyes; and, as you see them, behold, the sin of the world is forgiven and cast behind His back. You see before your eyes the spectacle of love that has swallowed up the pain of life, and made pain the minister of grace, to enthroned love upon the earth. So she helps us to make the cross an intelligible thing by making the love of

Jesus simpler. In a new certainty we know Christ crucified. When we go down from this tremendous spectacle we shall be able to take up our own cross, and in our own lives to die daily and be crucified with Christ. We shall learn from it that the highest secret and the deepest depth of life's possible experience is just love; and that the loving soul may go through a thousand deaths and triumph over them all, and change their pain to peace and holiness and everlasting **life.**



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