

The courageous women who weep (John 18:1-19:42)

They stand witness, watching in agony at his agony.

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I could not believe how exhausted I was. If it were not for Mary Magdalene and the other women, I might have collapsed along the way. They practically carried me to Golgotha along the cobblestone streets. I had stayed at the foot of the cross with John, my sister, and Mary Magdalene-- but shortly before Jesus died, the soldiers hurried us up the hill. We only saw from afar when they pierced his side. It was as if my heart were pierced, too.

This quotation comes from a collection of meditations at the end of the book *In Quest of the Jewish Mary*, by my friend Sister Mary Christine Athans. She brought to this work all of her knowledge, skill, and experience as a historian, theologian, writer, teacher, religious sister of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and longtime participant in Jewish-Christian dialogue. The book's final chapter gives voice to a Mary who has already experienced the annunciation and visitation, the birth of Jesus, Jesus' early public ministry, and the miracle at Cana. When Sister Mary Christine does public readings, she invites listeners to use their imaginations to come close to this Jewish Mary.

The Jewish Mary of her book makes me ponder the women at the cross. Women supported and accompanied Jesus from the start of his ministry, the evangelists tell

us. In John's version of the Passion, Mary, the other women, and the beloved disciple are the only ones who don't abandon Jesus on Golgotha. They stand witness, watching in agony at his agony. They love him to the end.

These biblical women at the cross remind me of so many women who have stood--and who today are still standing--at the cross, watching as their children are killed.

I think of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, 12 brave Argentine women whose children were disappeared during the military dictatorship of 1976-1983. Those women marched weekly in front of the presidential office building, refusing to be silent. Three of them were likewise disappeared.

I think of the "Mothers of the Movement," women in the U.S. whose children have died in recent years as a result of police violence. They have banded together to call attention to police who abuse their power and to insist on justice and reforms.

I think of the mothers weeping in war-torn Aleppo and Mosul, in conflicts in South Sudan and Nigeria, in Israel and Palestine, and elsewhere around the world.

On the local news here in Chicago, I hear the wailing of mothers whose children have been gunned down in gang violence or caught in the crossfire as they walked to school. How have these women faced the horror of that knock on the door, of hearing the official words, "I'm sorry to inform you, m'am, that your child has died..."?

How do these women carry on after their hearts have been pierced, like Mary's?

On Good Friday, so much focus is rightfully on Jesus' suffering on the cross. But let's look down below him and see the courageous women of John's story. In memory of them, let us pray for women who today will weep for their children, refusing to be comforted. And let us hold in prayer the women on today's Golgothas who, in the face of horrible suffering, somehow find the strength to hold each other up.