

**Holy Week:  
An Invitation to Walk with Christ**

**Ruth Haley Barton**

*“Stay together, friends, don’t scatter and sleep.  
Our friendship is made of being awake.”*  
Rumi

In her book *Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris comments that in a monastery, Holy Week is “a total surrender to worship.” This surrender allows for a greater focus on the events leading up to and moving us through Resurrection Sunday—Jesus’ gathering with his friends the night before his death to share a last meal, his teaching and ministry to his disciples on that night, his arrest, trial, execution and finally his Resurrection. Such a surrender to worship allows those who participate an opportunity to *walk with Christ* through the culminating events of his life here on earth and to be alert and awake to what he has to teach them along the way.

Walking with Christ is a central metaphor for the spiritual life; there are things that we learn by staying alert and walking with Jesus during Holy Week that we cannot learn in any other way. Some of the harder lessons and mysteries of our faith are lived out right in front of our eyes during these days and the lessons to be learned are best taught in the intimacy of our relationship with Christ as we walk the path together.

To stay awake to his passion during Holy Week is a challenging invitation, to be sure. It is one thing to learn how to be like Christ during the triumphs of the Palm Sunday experience when everything is as we hoped it would be. It is easy to follow Christ then—to enjoy the pomp and circumstance, the good will and limelight. It is quite another to learn how to be like Christ in the midst of betrayal, violence, pain, struggle, and death. As Barbara Brown Taylor commented, “I want to stop about a day short of following Jesus all the way!”

## **The Gift of Being There**

Jesus' dark night began, ironically, with the kiss of a friend. The irony had to do with the fact that Jesus had given such priority to cultivating relationships with his disciples during his brief time on earth and now he was experiencing the betrayal of his deep longing within that most intimate circle. Just when he needed them most, his closest friends kept leaving in one way or another—either by falling asleep, misunderstanding the situation, betraying him, or denying him.

Some of Jesus' most human moments had to do with his poignant expressions of longing for companionship. From the very first moment of his life in ministry he invited "those whom he wanted...to be with him," the Scriptures say in Mark 3. He accepted his ultimate aloneness as we all must, but his longing for intimacy and friendship with those he loved expressed itself consistently and in different ways throughout his life. When his teaching became too challenging and many chose to leave, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "Will you leave me also?" As their relationships deepened, Jesus said, "I no longer call you servants, I call you friends." And one of the crowning achievements of his life was that he loved his own until the end. (John 13:1)

Perhaps the most compelling expression of Christ's longing for companionship was his request for his disciples to accompany him to the Garden of Gethsemane and to pray with him through the dark night of his betrayal and death. (Matthew 26: 36-37) There was something about knowing that his friends were nearby that provided strength and comfort. He invited Peter, James and John, whom he had come to trust the most, to come farther than the others. And as he began to grieve more openly and to struggle with what was before him, he asked them specifically to stay awake with him. He seemed to have an awareness of how hard it is to stay awake and present to someone else's pain but

he asked them anyway. He knew the human tendency to “check out” when the human struggle becomes too much to bear. Only those who are closest stay through the end. As we walk along this way, perhaps Jesus has something to say to us regarding those moments when we, too, feel ourselves abandoned by those who were closest to us. Is there a comfort in being with Jesus *in this moment*?

### **Going all the Way**

Every year at this time, we have the opportunity to “go all the way” in reliving the events of Jesus’ last days here on this earth. Like the first disciples we have the opportunity to choose, as best we can, to deepen our friendship with Christ by communing with him and learning from him as we walk each step of the way. At the beginning of this week we might ask, How will I be intentional about staying awake with Christ through all the events of this week? In the midst of leading others through Holy Week, where is that very private place where I can be present to Christ’s suffering, learning the very personal lessons he has for me?

As we are intentional about seeking ways to walk with Christ through the events of this week, we are responding to his deep and consistent desire to be with those he loved—*particularly during the time of his agony*. This is an act of love and friendship with Christ. It is the gift of *being present* during the hardest and most unnerving part of his journey; we do it because he asks those he loves to remain near him and to stay with him, awake and alert. This is the gift of ourselves, which is the truest gift we have to give.

Let us pray together as we enter this Holy Week...

*Lord Jesus Christ, prepare our hearts to walk with you the rest of the way. Help us to find ourselves in this part of your story and not run from the pain and the unanswerable questions contained within it.*

*Draw us to sit with you at the Last Supper where you shared your heart so tenderly with your friends and also faced your betrayer honestly and without malice.*

*Help us to stay awake in the Garden of that Dark Night, as you wrestle with the death and dying that must take place in order for God's will to come forth.*

*Give us the wisdom to know, as you did, when it is time to lay down our life so that some day we can take it up again.*

*Give us the grace to endure the pain of witnessing your humiliation and rejection so that we can more gracefully endure our own.*

*Help us to be as gut-wrenchingly honest as you were when you cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*

*Grant us the courage to let go when it is time.*

*Grant us the patience to wait with you in the silence of death until you call forth the resurrection.*

Amen.

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