

Staying with Jesus

We love to celebrate the peaks of Jesus' life in worship, but how often do we remain with him during the valleys of his life?

by [Anne M. Jernberg](#) in the [April 5, 2011](#) issue



Andrea Mantegna, *Agony in the Garden*, circa 1460.

As a divinity school student I knew that Jesus needed me to love my enemies and serve the "least of these." I even discerned that perhaps Jesus needed me to pastor people in a church context. Likewise, there was no question of my need for Jesus. My Baptist heritage had sung me into that knowledge: "I want Jesus to walk with me. All along my pilgrim journey, Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me."

But it had never dawned on me that Jesus needed me, at least not until Holy Week a few years ago. I was on my knees in a monastery. I was imagining being in the Garden of Gethsemane as the brothers and other worshipers and I gathered and sang the Taizé refrain "Stay with me; remain here with me, watch and pray, watch and pray" over and over again. It was then that I realized that Jesus needed me to walk with him throughout his life.

I had come to the monastery that evening for a brief respite from my studies. I left four hours later with bruised knees, an aching back, a raspy voice and a growling stomach. To top it off, I felt guilty because I didn't stay through the night. (The brothers began singing that night and continued to sing in shifts until the Good

Friday service the following afternoon.)

When I showed up at 5:00 p.m., I took my regular seat in the nave of the chapel and expected the usual half-hour evening prayer service to begin. It never dawned on me that the usual evening prayer service would be radically altered because we were remembering an unusual evening in Jesus' life. Instead of simply remembering something, I experienced something that night. Someone read the words Jesus prayed in the garden, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42), and then we were instructed to get on our knees and begin singing. That was it—one brief scripture followed by 18 hours of singing four simple phrases.

Some sang the phrases through a few times and then got up and left, looking awkward and unsure. Others lasted longer. I made it for a few hours. The length of our stay was not as important as the fact that we stayed—we remained with Jesus. My knees would have given anything to be strolling with Jesus, as I was kneeling on a hard slate floor and could feel its chill through my wool pants. (I wondered if the brothers were wearing knee pads underneath their cassocks.)

That night on my knees changed my understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. I am not sure whether it was the hypnotic empathy I developed for the disciples who fell asleep that night or the heaviness that weighed on my heart as I sang the same song over and over, realizing that my words were close to the thoughts of Jesus and that his thoughts were an earnest plea for companionship during an excruciating, long and lonely night.

The experience also changed the way I worship during Holy Week. If the last week of Jesus' life is holy, then it is set apart from every other week of his life. That is why we need to not be apart from Jesus during this time. Jesus was always stepping toward other people, healing wounds, offering forgiving words, teaching life-changing truths. But in the last week of his life, he comes even closer to us because we see him struggling with his own brokenness; we can share the emotions of loneliness in addition to imagining the pain of his physically broken body on the cross. He breaks bread with his friends, and one of his friends betrays him. Peter denies knowing him. Holy Week is full of moments when those closest to Jesus let him down. As his disciples, we need not let him down during this time; we need not lose the opportunity for transformation and succumb to a fate that flies in the face of resurrection hope.

We love to celebrate the peaks of Jesus' life in worship, but how often do we remain with him during the valleys of his life? Holy Week can be more holy if we prepare to spend time with Jesus, becoming a part of his life and a companion on his journey.

This will be the fifth year that I have created daily Holy Week services of 20 to 30 minutes for my congregation. The scriptures are simple, the ideas are not unique, but those who gather draw closer to Jesus in profound ways. Together we experience Palm Sunday as the threshold on the path to the cross.

The services may include foot washing or communion, with each person washing the feet of the next or serving communion to him or her. For one service, volunteers created a garden in the chapel with plants and flowers; people were invited to come into the garden with images or words representative of "their will" and "God's will." After sitting a while they left one image in the garden and returned to their seats with the other.

Instead of a ritual of anointing, sometimes I give each person a picture of Jesus on the cross or in the garden or at the table or in the tomb. The person dips his or her fingers in oil and anoints the picture as a prayer of solidarity and companionship and compassion to and for Jesus himself. Instead of offering spoken commentary on the seven last words of Christ, I pair each verse with an image and allow time for reflection. On Good Friday, I close the service by lifting up my hands in a gesture toward heaven and walking out in silence. On Holy Saturday we sing, "Stay with me, remain here with me, watch and pray, watch and pray" while people light candles at the altar that's been transformed to represent a tomb. There are many possibilities.

"Being with" and "walking alongside" Jesus through his life is light-years beyond simply reading about his life and trying to follow its example. Living out our faith means not only remembering the Incarnate One but also reexperiencing what he experienced, realizing that his human experience was full of human needs—including companionship. If we believe in the living Holy Spirit, then why would Jesus not continue to need us to walk with him, if not for his sake, then to show our love and gratitude to the One who sent him to walk with us?

We need for Jesus to need us to share in his life. Otherwise we are people who ask him to meet our needs without growing in a relationship that requires something of us and challenges us to appreciate the grace we have been receiving all along.