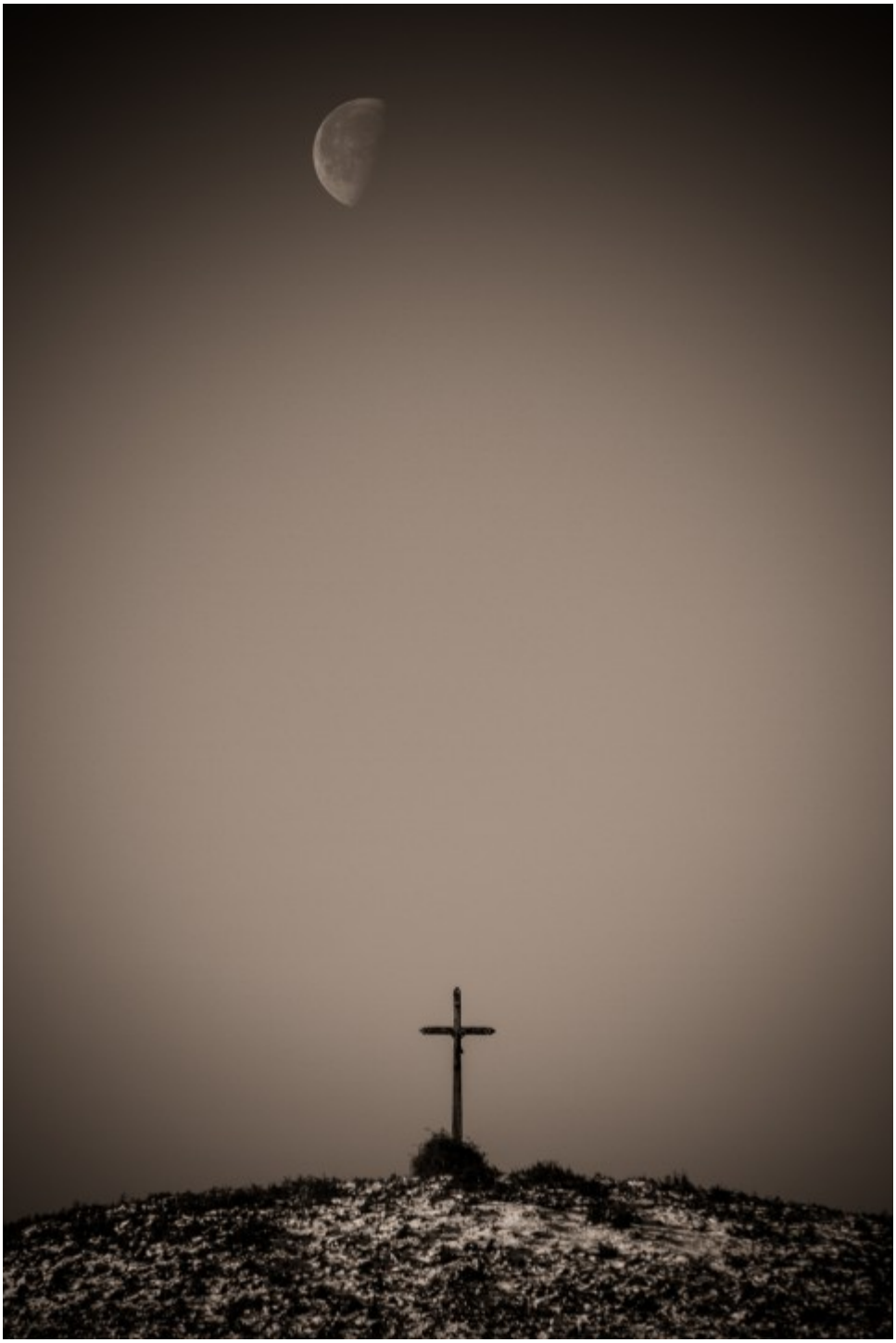
The cross as good news for women

# The passion narrative is the story of a series of violations. Is it good for us to find our identity in it?

by A. Katherine Grieb in the October 27, 1999 issue





Six years ago, in a powerful article in these pages, Ruth Schmidt wrote about how her entire way of perceiving the world changed when she was raped. It was as if everything she had been during her previous 16 years had been thrown away. Since that event, "I see differently. I hear differently. I surely believe differently. I listen to music as a woman who was raped. I make decisions on what I will and will not purchase as a woman who was raped. I judge my work environment as a woman

who was raped" (January 6-13, 1993). Ruth Schmidt came to see everything through that one lens. At least at the time of writing, the story of her violation defined her life.

Her statement is significant and provocative for those formulating a Christian hermeneutic of experience. Christians, after all, are called to interpret the events of their lives through one lens. We live as those who, in our baptisms, have been "marked by Christ forever." Furthermore, we define ourselves through our association with one who was violated—who died a horrible and shameful death, was stripped naked and hung on a cross, who cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The passion narrative is, to borrow Phyllis Trible's phrase, "a text of terror." It is the story of a series of violations. The narrative has been shaped to force the reader to experience its events in slow motion. As if a movie camera stopped at every frame for a close-up shot, we seem to see every angry face in the crowd, to hear every word of abuse, to feel every blow. Gradually we become aware that this story contains every story of violation we have ever heard. Through God's story, we read the stories of our own lives—not just those in which we play the part of Jesus, but also those in which we have been Judas, Peter, Pilate's wife, false witnesses, fleeing disciples or members of an anonymous, uncaring crowd. Not only do we Christians tell and retell this story of terror, but we preach and try to live "Christ crucified." We seek to have "the mind of Christ," who humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Recently the question has been asked: Is it good for Christian women to find their identity in one who was violated? Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is among those who wants to put warning labels on biblical texts before they are distributed to women: "Caution! Could be dangerous to your health and survival!" In "Christ Also Suffered: Why Certain Forms of Holiness Are Bad for You," a poignant essay in Ann Loades's *Searching for Lost Coins*, Loades criticizes what she thinks is a morbid overidentification with Christ as suffering victim.

It is possible to put too much emphasis on Christ as suffering victim, and biblical texts are often misused. Certainly we need to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy forms of religious life—although that is a complicated enterprise. (Was Francis of Assisi insane to give away his possessions to the poor? Or are we who endanger the planet by consuming far more than our share of the world's resources

the ones who are crazy?)

In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Wayne Booth reminds us that before we write off a text as sexist, we must learn to distinguish between what the characters in a story say and do and the point of view of the narrator. In many contemporary texts, the narrator is unreliable; in the biblical texts, the narrator—or, better, the implied author—is reliable.

If we pay attention to what the narrative is saying, we can see at least four reasons why God's story is good news for women. The first is that the passion narrative does not blame the victim, as we so often do. Unlike Job's friends (who are still very much with us), the narrator of the crucifixion story insists that the one put to death was righteous.

Second, God's story honors the feelings of those who are violated. According to many statistics, 95 percent of the victims of domestic violence are women; some form of domestic violence occurs at least once in as many as two-thirds of all marriages; and one women in four is sexually assaulted. Women often blame themselves—for not knowing how to deter an attacker, for falling apart afterwards. That's why we need to notice that Jesus does not die well, according to the standards of his time. In the Greco-Roman world the noble death was exemplified by Socrates, who continued to instruct his disciples while he calmly drank his deadly dose of hemlock, or by Rabbi Akiba, who recited the Shema while he was dying. According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus died screaming.

While God's story honors these feelings of fear, anger and horror, it warns us that our perceptions of what we are experiencing may be inaccurate. The experience of violation may not define us, after all. When Jesus cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he feels abandoned by God. But the author's point of view makes clear that this is not so.

In Matthew's version Jesus says at Gethsemane, "Do you think I cannot appeal to my Father and he will at once send me more than 12 legions of angels?" Later, when he is on the cross, some mock him by saying, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross and we will believe you!" The reader is invited to wonder, "So where are those 12 legions of angels? Where's even one lousy angel?"

Jesus feels that he dies alone. But the reader of the Gospels knows better. The veil of the temple is torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shakes. Rocks split, tombs

open and the dead arise. All of creation resonates with the outrage of Jesus's death. God is so visibly, powerfully present that even the Roman centurion exclaims, "Truly this was the Son of God!" Though Jesus may have doubted that he was still God's beloved child, his bitter experience of abandonment was not the whole of reality—which is the third lesson of the passion story.

Those who have been violated are often discarded. Murder often follows rape. Those who survive are often rejected and humbled by others. Those who press charges are often put on trial themselves. But God's story makes clear that people who are violated by others are vindicated by God. The crucified one is raised from the dead, lifted up, loved and honored. God's story teaches us that human atrocities are not the last word. They do not define our identity. God alone does. God takes what the world considers trash and gives it honor. A woman's value is not decided by the society in which she lives.

In addition to these four major lessons, the passion narratives also show how suffering tends to isolate us from others who cannot or will not understand our suffering. That one's suffering intensifies when the enemy is also one's Christian brother or sister is still not well understood by the church. But it is clear in God's story, where one of "the twelve" betrays Jesus and another denies him.

What does it mean for women when their denominations privilege Ephesians 5 over 1 Corinthians 7? One of the things women learn from the passion narrative is that popular support comes and goes; for every substantial gain, expect a backlash. Women who read God's story wisely will know better than to trust the fickle crowd. Instead, we will put our trust where it belongs: in the God who is faithful and true, the God who vindicates us.

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