March 30, Good Friday (John 18:1-19:42)

Who were the people who watched Jesus' crucifixion?

by Debra J. Mumford in the March 14, 2018 issue

When many of us hear the word *crucify* or *crucifixion*, we think of Jesus. We think about the excruciating death Jesus suffered at the hands of the Roman authorities. We think about the religious leaders who plotted to have Jesus killed. We think about Jesus' betrayal by Judas that led to his death. We think about the Roman soldiers who cast lots for Jesus' clothes.

But what about the crowd? Crucifixion was a public spectacle, which means there had to be a public willing to watch people be tortured and killed. Who were the people who came out to witness crucifixions? Why did they watch?

When Ell Persons was lynched in Memphis in 1917, it was a brutal public spectacle. Persons was an African American man accused of rape and murder. Twenty-five men seized him from a train on which he was being transported to stand trial. The men had decided there would be no trial. Instead, they had spread the word that there would be a public lynching. They publicized the time and the place in advance.

By the time the men arrived at their destination with Persons in tow, thousands of white spectators had gathered. Traffic was backed up for miles. The crowd was there as a demonstration of racial solidarity. White people came out to ensure that existential fear was instilled into all black people. They also came out to be entertained. Parents not only brought small children to witness the lynching; they hoisted them on their shoulders to make sure they could see everything that was about to happen.

Persons was tied up with rope, doused with gasoline, and set on fire. But people in the crowd complained that if he was burned he would die much too quickly. So the fire was extinguished. Two men cut off his ears. The rope and the ears became souvenirs—trophies to remind attendees of the lynching in the years to come.

Between 1877 (the end of Reconstruction) and 1950, more than 4,000 African Americans were lynched in southern states. While the justification for lynching was sometimes based on accusation of crimes such as rape, blacks were often lynched for noncriminal reasons, such as the suspicion that a black man looked at, associated with, or made advances upon a white woman. Other trivial offenses that led to lynchings included using an improper title for a white person, speaking disrespectfully, failing to step off the sidewalk, arguing with a white man, insulting a white man, or bumping into a white woman. Like crucifixions, lynchings were sometimes preplanned, widely advertised public spectacles. During many lynchings, vendors sold food and drinks. (For more information, see the Equal Justice Initiative report *Lynching in America*.)

Through lynching, perpetrators sought to terrorize African Americans to such an extent that they would not even think about resisting their own oppression and racial subjugation. In the case of the lynching of Emmett Till, however, this effort backfired. In August 1955, the 14-year-old from Chicago was visiting relatives in the Mississippi Delta when he was kidnapped from their home after being accused of flirting with the wife of a white store owner. The store owner and his brother beat Till severely, gouged out his eye, shot him, and threw his body into the Tallahatchie River.

When Till's unrecognizable body was returned to his mother in Chicago, she insisted that his coffin be open for the funeral so that everyone could see the brutality with which her son was murdered. Thousands of people viewed his body in person. African American publications such as *Jet* and the *Chicago Defender* published images of it, sparking national outrage. Till's horrific murder didn't deter African Americans; it energized them. Outrage over it helped fuel the 381-day bus boycott that began that December when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat. A heinous murder, intended to keep African Americans in check, instead inspired and sustained their resistance.

In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone highlights a paradox of the gospel: out of the shameful and humiliating act of crucifixion comes hope. Like lynching, the cross represents the worst inclinations of humanity—the willingness to execute even innocent victims for the sake of personal and institutional power. Yet the intent of the crucifixion is not what determines its final meaning. Its gruesome nature is not what determines its future effects. The meaning of the crucifixion is found in relationships—relationships between Jesus and his followers, between his followers

and God. While the Roman world viewed the crucified with shame and disgrace, followers of Jesus in his day and since have found something else in their crucified Jesus: hope. Hope that Jesus understands the pain and oppression of the marginalized because he too experienced it. Hope that if they resist their oppression, their tomorrow can be better than today.

Until injustice of any kind is no more, may the cross inspire hope for those who feel lost and forsaken—and resistance for the oppressed and their allies.