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“Is It I?”

Matthew 26: 20- 25

Upon learning that her husband was dead, Marty Halyburton lived in a daze for several months. Her only joy was Dabney, their young daughter, whom Porter had never seen. Marty would see the child smile, take a step, or say a word and think, “Oh, Porter would love to see that.” Then she would realize, ‘Porter is dead.’

She settled in the Atlanta area, and slowly began to create a new life.

After a year or so, she began dating a salesman and started trying to reassemble a normal life.

As she heard a few stories of the mistreatment of American POWs, she consoled herself with the thought that at least Porter had been spared that horror.

A year and a half after she had been told of Porter’s death,

Marty received a call from a naval officer asking if he could come over to see her.

He didn’t say why he was coming, but when she sat down and thought about it, a realization hit her.

When the man arrived and started stammering she said, “You’ve come to tell me that my husband is alive.”

The man said, “I’ve been worrying about how I was going to tell you, and now you’ve just made it easier on me.” The CIA had managed to obtain photographs of some American prisoners being marched through the streets of Hanoi – Porter Halyburton was among them.

For awhile, the idea of Porter being alive was as disorienting as Porter being dead.

Then disbelief gave way to ecstasy. When she called the guy she had been dating to share the news, he said, “I’ve lost some girls in my day, but never like this.”

Marty’s story was national news for a brief moment.

Porter and two other airmen were the first Americans reclassified from killed in action to POWs since World War II. In time, Marty became connected with the wives of other POWs, though the extent of her activism was writing letters to congressmen reminding them that America’s prisoners should not be forgotten.

She conducted a few interviews, but she would be the first to say that she was not media savvy.

Yet she cut a memorable figure: a cute, vivacious, little blonde raising a daughter by herself.

Then an acquaintance’s father asked her to come speak to a group of which he was a part.

Since the engagement was months away, and the venue was supposed to be small, she agreed.

Then the man called back almost instantly to say that their speaker for another engagement had cancelled and they needed her to speak now. She agreed to do so, only to find that the occasion was a meeting of the American Bar Association, and the person she was filling in for was Bobby Kennedy!

She spoke only for ten minutes, and focused mostly on the sorrow of a daughter who had never seen her father.

But when she finished, to her amazement, she received a prolonged standing ovation.

Suddenly, the realization dawned on her: she could be an instrument of change.

She could be a voice for the husband she could not see or touch.

She began to accept more invitations to speak, whenever, wherever, she was asked.

This pert young lady thought of herself as nothing special, would have never thought of herself as able to converse with a senator, governor or president, or even attend a party without a male escort.

But now she spoke in all kinds of venues, including governors’ mansions and the White House.

She grew into a role she could not have imagined.

She had wanted someone to become a voice for the voiceless prisoners.

Circumstances had forced her to realize, “It is I.
The person I’ve been looking for to champion my husband’s rights is me.”

The twelve men sitting around Jesus at that table would have considered themselves ordinary men. Sure, they were following an extraordinary Master who was inaugurating an extraordinary movement. But they would have said that they were very ordinary men, from ordinary backgrounds. They may have dreamed of doing great things for God, but they considered themselves very minor figures. So imagine their consternation that night, amidst the most somber circumstances imaginable, when their Lord said to them, “Truly, one of you will betray me.” This stunned them. They thought of themselves as being ordinary guys who might have hoped to do something great, but who could not have imagined themselves doing something so horrible and heinous as betraying Jesus. “Is it I?” they suddenly wondered. It was as if the blinders were taken off their eyes. Suddenly it dawned on them that though they were ordinary men, they were capable of doing something extraordinarily good – or extraordinarily catastrophic. They suddenly realized that they could achieve great heights – or sink into abysmal depths. Each man asked himself in turn, ‘Could I be the person who will do this great and terrible thing? Is it I?’

So, too, we participate in Holy Week, thinking we are nothing but observers. We think we are nothing but spectators of these violent events of treachery, courage, and action. We hear our Lord say, ‘You will betray me. You will fall away from me in the clutch,’ and we think, ‘Yeah, those guys are not up to the demands of faith.’ But have we ever stopped to think ‘Is it I?’ Do we ever stop to ask, ‘Aren’t we Christ’s disciples?’ Isn’t it true that you and I are now the ones who help constitute the earthly body of Christ? Could it not be true that we are the ones capable of great good or great treachery? Do we ever stop to think that when Christ says to us, “Take and eat, this is my body,” he is enlisting us to take part in a serious and momentous enterprise? Does it ever occur to us that when Christ says to us , “Take and drink, this is my blood shed for the remission of your sins,” he is in actuality incorporating us into a serious and momentous story? We ponder the story of our Lord in his great hour of need and think ‘Somebody ought to stand with him.’ Does it ever occur to us that the question we might need to ask is, ‘Is it I?’ Could we be the ones who are supposed to be Christ’s hands and feet and voice for others? We partake of a symbolic meal, but it is a symbolic meal fraught with meaning. What we are really doing is pledging ourselves to be part of the ongoing story of God. When we participate in this meal we are accepting the fact that we could be the very ones who serve as God’s great instrument – or God’s betrayer. The question we face is not confined to a historical event long ago. The question with which we must wrestle every day is: “Is it I?” Come, let us eat together.

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Maundy Thursday Communion Homily
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