

Mark LaRocca-Pitts

# Standing on Holy Ground

**I**t is hard to be a caregiver. Beyond the physical, emotional, and psychological challenges of caring for those who are sick is a deeper spiritual challenge. This deeper spiritual challenge tempts us to fix the suffering, which will drain us of energy and goodwill if not recognized, understood, and dealt with properly.

There are three responses to suffering, which are illustrated in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion: 1) pack your bags and flee; 2) remain available, but maintain a safe distance; and 3) be fully present and involved. It is only with the third response that the temptation to fix the suffering arises. Before turning to this, we will consider responses one and two.

In Matthew 26:56 and Mark 14:50 we find the response of packing your bags and fleeing. As the passion of Jesus begins with his arrest, his disciples "deserted him and fled." Like many family members and friends who promise their help and support, when the need is greatest, they are nowhere to be found.

The second response is found in the three Synoptic Gospels where "the women who had followed Jesus" did not flee like the disciples, but were "looking on from a distance" (Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40; Luke 23:49). When Jesus most needed

those who loved and cared for him, these women remained available, but at a safe distance. Like many who care for the sick and dying, they appear to be near, but are not fully invested.

The caregiver's response is found in John's account of the crucifixion. Again it speaks of the women who had followed Jesus, but it now adds his mother and the disciple Jesus loved "standing near the

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cross" (John 19:25-26). Mary and this disciple neither packed their bags and fled nor did they remain at a safe distance. Even in the presence of intense suffering and then death, they remained fully present and involved: they stood their ground "near the cross."

"Standing near the cross" is our role as caregivers. With this role, however, arises the temptation of somehow trying to fix the suffering. If Mary and this disciple could have done anything to fix Jesus' suffering, they would have, but they couldn't, so they stood—neither flinching nor fixing—"near the cross." Our role as caregivers often involves standing at the bed-

side while those we love suffer and then die. The time for fixing has passed. We have done all that we can—medicine has reached (and often exceeded!) its limits—and there is nothing we can do except to remain standing by their side. We cannot run. We cannot hide. We cannot fix. Instead, we stand in the presence of suffering—in all our strength and in all our brokenness—and thereby transform suffering

and make it holy. When we do this, we find ourselves, like Mary and the beloved disciple, standing on holy ground watching, waiting, and caring as those we love suffer and die.

It is hard to be a caregiver, but it is holy work. May God grant us strength to stand firmly when those we care for need us most. □



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