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"Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble..." I was not there, but being in this church today and listening again to the story of the Passion and the readings from Isaiah causes me to tremble.

"Were you there when they nailed Him to the cross?" I was not. However, in the mystery of the liturgy, we are celebrating Jesus' passion today. Somehow it's not an event from a long time ago; it's a contemporary event. Today Christ is suffering; today Christ is crucified; today Christ is put to death... This is beautifully expressed in the Orthodox liturgy in a very old antiphon very often used for the solemn entrance of Good Friday's celebration.

*"Today He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung on the tree,
The King of the angels is crowned with a crown of thorns.
He who wrapped the heavens in clouds is wrapped in the purple of mockery.
He who freed Adam in the Jordan is slapped on the face.
The Bridegroom of the Church is affixed to the Cross with nails.
The Son of the virgin is pierced by a spear.
We worship Thy passion, O Christ.
Show us also Thy glorious resurrection."*

The keyword here is *today*. Today Christ is crucified, and we are invited to contemplate his passion and death before celebrating his resurrection on Easter morning. The great difference between us and the people who were physically present at this event is that we know the outcome; we know that Jesus' passion is not the end of Jesus' story; we know that Jesus' death is not the last event of Jesus' life. Actually, without the hope and the light of the Resurrection, Jesus' passion and death would have been a complete failure.

What always strikes me is the fact that from the Last Supper to His last breath, Jesus appears to be in charge. He is a victim, of course, but he also seems to be the only one who knows exactly what is happening. The naked facts are that he was betrayed, falsely accused by the religious authorities, tortured by the Roman power, and executed as a traitor to the Empire. But in fact, it appears that he freely offered his life as the ultimate testimony of his passion for God, as the ultimate testimony of his passion for humanity. He gave his life in order to open a new future to us, in order to defeat once and for all the forces of evil that we can also call the sin of the world. He gave his life in order for us to have access to a new and unending life — a life reconciled with God and each other.

Today we have difficulty understanding Jesus' passion and Jesus' death. Why should he have to die? Why should he have to die like that? There is no easy answer. The disciples did not understand either, even when Jesus told them several times that he would have to die... During the Passion, the disciples, Jesus' friends, and family did not understand what was happening and why... At least they did not understand until the Resurrection. In the light of the Resurrection, with also some explanations from Jesus and some help from the Holy Spirit, the disciples realized how much Jesus' passion and death was the fulfillment of some biblical passages like the text of Isaiah that we read a few minutes ago. They realized also that the Resurrection — and its consequences for us — would not have been possible without Jesus' death...

What makes this event unique is not the uniqueness of Jesus' sufferings; so many people of all ages are suffering now in our world, sometimes bearing unthinkable pain. What makes this event unique is not that an innocent man was tortured and executed; so many innocent people are tortured and executed today in our world... No, what makes this event unique is that the one hanging on the cross is the Eternal Son of God. In Christianity we are bold to claim that today, on the cross, God is suffering;

God is dying. In Jesus God has experienced human suffering, human death, and human despair, too, in God's own heart.

Good Friday is an invitation to think and to meditate about the extreme and total love of Jesus for his Father and for each of us; an invitation to think and meditate about the extreme and total love of God for God's people. At Good Friday our salvation begins and will be total on Easter morning.

Good Friday helps us also to understand that Jesus really experienced suffering, anguish, pain, and death as a regular human being.

He did not just pretend to be a human being; he did not just pretend to suffer; he did not just pretend to die — he did. We know by experience that pain and suffering are still present in our world, in our lives; we know that death is still present, but Good Friday, understood in the light of Easter, helps us to acknowledge that even in the deepest darkness of suffering and death there is still hope because Jesus is our light and our salvation. Even in the deepest darkness, there is still at least Jesus' light. Jesus' death is not a defeat, but the definitive step to his greatest victory: by his death, he defeated death itself.

"Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?" I was not, but I know that Jesus gave his life for every human being. That means that he gave his life to me too.

What should I do now? Today we are invited to take the time to think, pray, and meditate about this love beyond measure that is Jesus' love for us; we are invited to see our lives with clarity and honesty, and to repent for what we have done wrong. We are still sinners, but forgiven sinners in Jesus' death and resurrection. We are invited to live our lives and to do the best we can to love and serve those for whom the Son of God gave his life.

"He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, (...) and by his bruises, we are healed." Amen