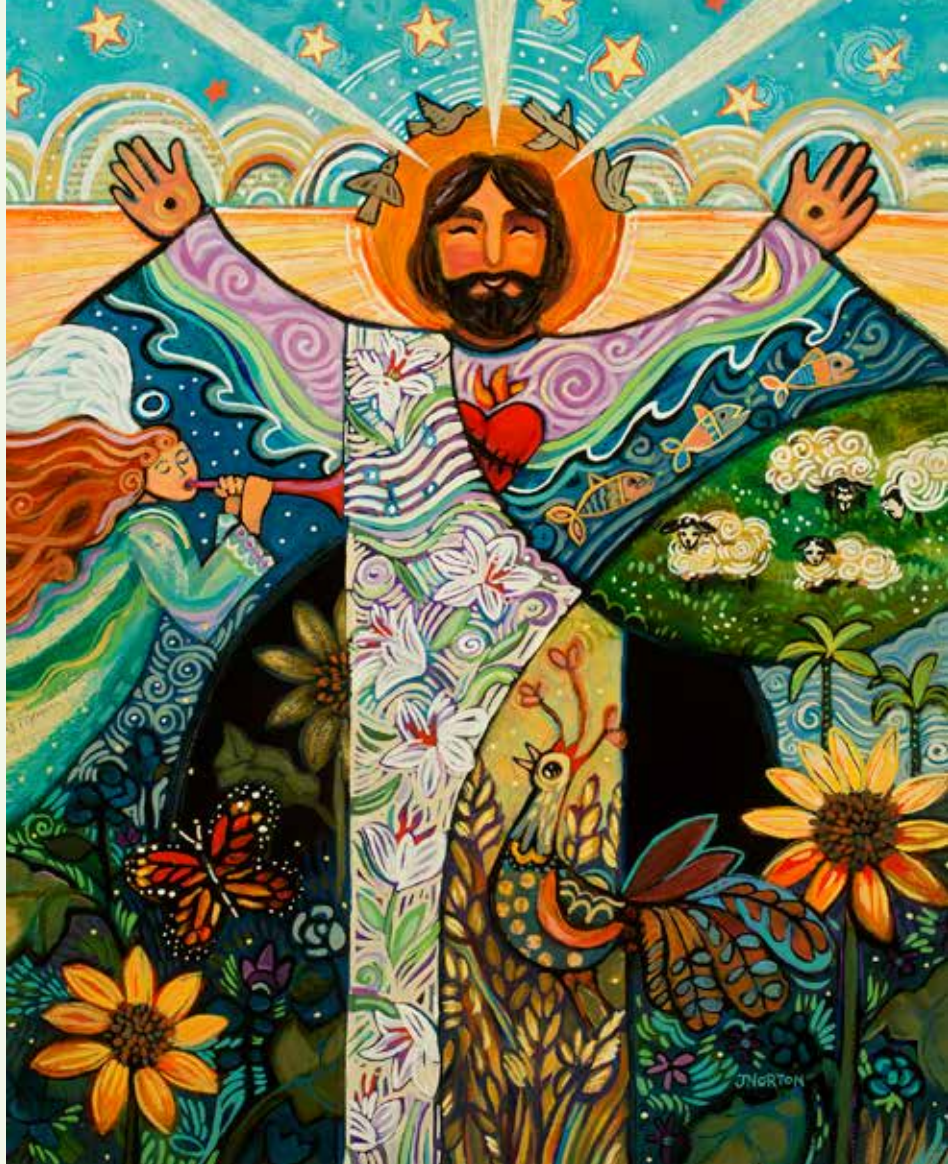


# Resisting Evil

Kathleen Rushton writes that the women and the Beloved Disciple standing at the foot of Jesus's cross in John 19:25-30 are engaged in resistance to the evil of the Roman Empire.



WE HEAR JOHN'S story of the suffering and death of Jesus (Jn 18:1-19:42) at the Good Friday liturgy. An aspect we may not notice is the mention of those "standing near the cross" (Jn 19:25-30) and what their presence there can mean.

## Crucifixion in the Roman Empire

The Romans inflicted crucifixion as a form of public execution on conquered peoples and especially on the lower classes — slaves, criminals and unruly people in rebellious provinces such as Judea. Because many welcomed the security and the worldwide peace of the Roman Empire, they colluded with the imposition of such a cruel death which was used as a deterrent.

This barbaric form of execution entailed great humiliation. The naked victim was on display in a prominent place. University of Otago theologian David Tombs has written that crucifixion involved sexual abuse and Jesus, like all who were crucified, would have suffered this. Women were also crucified.

Crucifixion was so abhorrent that Jesus was not depicted on the cross in early Christian art. Later, as shown in the illumination from the Syriac *Rabbula Gospels* completed in 586, Jesus is clothed and not suffering because he has risen.

Martin Hengel says that reflecting on "the harsh reality of crucifixion in antiquity may help us to overcome the

acute loss of reality which is found so often in present theology and preaching."

## Dangerous World for Christians

Judaism was considered a "legitimate" religion and Jews had an exemption from worshipping Roman gods and goddesses as long as they submitted to the political laws of Rome. When Christianity grew out of Judaism, Christians lost this protection. Christianity only became legal in the Roman Empire in the early fourth century. Sjef van Tilborg writes that before then the "readers of the Johannine story enter into a dangerous world when they finish their reading and are going to confront their daily city life."

## Women's Resistance

Raymond Brown states it would be unusual for the Romans to permit family and friends anywhere near a crucifixion. While the four Gospels mention women, only John adds that they, along with "his mother and the disciple whom he loved," were "standing near the cross" (Jn 19:26-27) before and after the death of Jesus.

Luise Schottroff argues that the women followers of a crucified person were at risk as their presence was part of their resistance to Roman oppression. It is essential to relate their resistance in early Christianity to its larger context, namely, women's resistance in the Roman Empire

such as when they protested publicly and collectively against the 215 BCE *Lex Oppia* law which restricted women's rights and was repealed in 195 BCE.

### “Jesus handed over the Spirit”

It is commonly understood that Jesus's death is being described in the words he “gave up his spirit.” In the ancient world, death was never described in this way. The word translated as “gave up” is used when Judas “hands over” Jesus. The Greek has no word for “his”. An accurate translation, therefore, is “handed over the spirit.”

James Swetman observes that “at the deeper level the climax of the Passion of the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel is not the death of Jesus, but a bestowal of the Spirit” who was promised previously (Jn 7:39; 14:16-17). Jesus “handed over the Spirit” to his mother, the women and the Beloved Disciple.

### A Beloved Disciple

And who is the Beloved Disciple? Sandra Schneiders suggests each reader/hearer is a Beloved Disciple to whom Jesus hands over the Spirit. Why? To finish the work of God's ongoing creation and re-creation. The works of God were to be finished by Jesus. As his death approached: “Jesus knew that all was finished” (Jn 19:28). His last words were: “It is finished” (Jn 19:30).

Palestinian theologian Mitri Raheb sees that for Jesus, faith was active in resisting and dismantling empire – not so much as a reaction to Rome, but through the new vision of the Reign of God. The way of Jesus is to be seen in the context of Roman occupied Palestine and Raheb sets before us that the challenge for Christians today is “to engage and change empire.” He continues the “Messiah has come ... God had done [God's] part. The ball was now in the court of humankind ... The transformed faithful were to engage the world, to challenge the monopoly of power, and to live the life of an already liberated people ... belief in Jesus as the yearned for Messiah replaced the idea of divine intervention with the direct intervention of the faithful.” Today, “Beloved Disciples” are to step into this world “to engage and change the empire.”

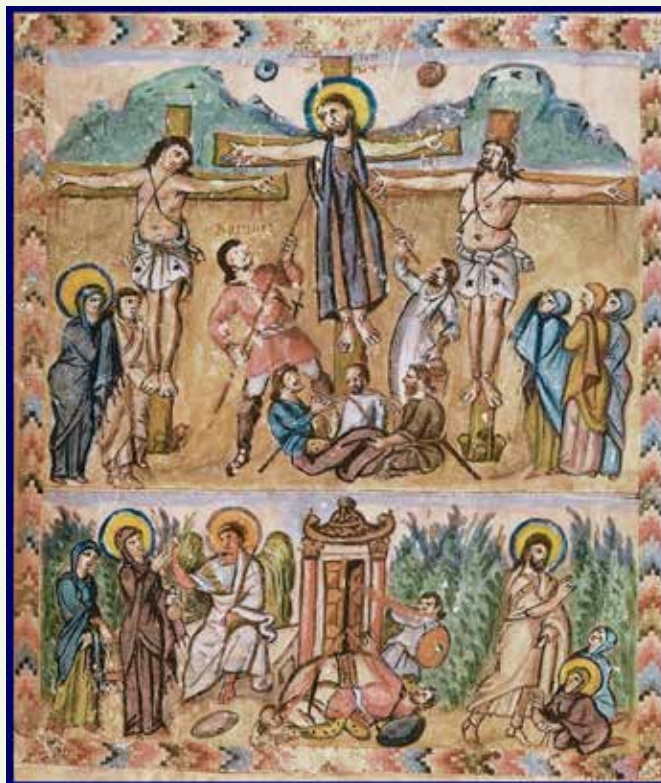
### Resistance

We have a history of resistance In Aotearoa New Zealand. In 1893, for example, Māori and Pākehā women, won the right to vote in general elections. While Kate Sheppard is our most celebrated suffragist, many women, including

Meri Te Tai Mangakāhia (Ngāti Te Rēinga, Ngāti Manawa and Te Kaitūtae), worked tirelessly for change on two separate fronts: nationally for the parliament and within the Kotahitanga Māori parliament. The influence of the Christian Temperance Union is often disregarded but was a significant force for change. Along with Kate, whom the Prime Minister of the time called “that bloody woman” and

four other women, Meri, who was educated at St Mary's College, Auckland, features on the Kate Sheppard National Memorial sculpture in Christchurch.

In our present environment, hostility to all things Māori is being fostered by some. We face policies that encourage aggression towards te reo Māori and undermine the progress made towards acknowledging historic land injustices. We face policies that reward the well-off at the expense of those in poverty. As women's resistance to the Roman Empire led them to stand near the cross, we are drawn into their resistance as a Beloved Disciple – to prayer and action, “to engage and change empire.”



### Death-Resurrection

Let us return to the image from the *Rabbula Gospels*. The death-resurrection of Jesus is portrayed as interconnected – the lower panel portrays the Resurrection as told in Matthew 28. A careful reading of the New Testament reveals that when the suffering or death of Jesus is mentioned, close by in the text we find reference to his resurrection or to being raised up.

The mystery of death-resurrection inspires today's Beloved Disciple to participate in finishing the works of God – “to engage and change empire.” In this work, “[t]he Spirit, infinite bond of love, is intimately present at the very heart of the universe, inspiring and bringing new pathways” (*Laudato Si'* par 238). ♡

Reading for Good Friday – John 18:1-19:42

Left: *All Creation Sings Christ's Praise* by Jen Norton © Used with permission [www.jennortonartstudio.com](http://www.jennortonartstudio.com)

Above: Earliest crucifixion in an illuminated manuscript in *Vangeli di Rabbula/Rabbula Gospels* (6th Century) Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana

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