



## Sermon for Good Friday, April 15, 2022

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene      The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

We who follow Jesus face the reality of death.

We who follow Jesus face the reality of injustice and cruelty.

We who follow Jesus face the reality of betrayal, denial, and abandonment.

It is all here. This is the world. This is the sorrow, the horror, the trauma.

We do not run from it.

We cannot run from it.

We who would run away or look away and try to pretend that nothing has happened and everything is all right – well, we who would do that cannot know resurrection. Except, maybe as a nice pipe dream.

Except... That is exactly what happens.

We are like the disciples. We do run away. We do try to pretend that it doesn't involve us.

We are like the people of the city. We do close our blinds and curtains, and go about our routines as if there is nothing happening.

Even among these folks, even among us, the reality of death happens, the reality of injustice and cruelty happens, the reality of betrayal, denial, and abandonment happens.

And even if we are like the few disciples that follow him to Golgotha and see the whole terrible reality unfold, we are likely in a fog of incredible sorrow and anguish of grief and trauma. The reality is too much to bear.

But, even among these folks who withdraw or look away, just as among those who have seen and are lost in a fog, even among us, resurrection happens. Not as a pipe dream, but as an invasion of our coping strategies which we have grasped at, needily, convinced that we need them in order to survive. Even as the disciples huddle together in fear or retreat to the countryside or go fishing, they are invaded by the risen Christ Jesus. And when resurrection breaks in on them, they are able to face and embrace the terrible reality of crucifixion, and to see and speak of all the sorrow and terror with unflinching conviction. "This happened. And, guess what – something else happened."

And so, later Peter is able to state with complete, audacious honesty, “The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things.” Peter speaks hard truth, and says, “We have not forgotten.” And Peter offers promise and hope, even to those who had a part in the state-approved, religion-endorsed murder of Jesus. Peter – the one who had denied knowing Jesus three times on the night of Jesus’ arrest and mock trial. Peter – the one whom the risen Jesus asked three times, “Do you love me?” and drew Peter into the resurrection life that would lead him to his own cross. Peter has lost his fear and shame. He remembers and lets the memory of everything with Jesus grip and direct him.

On this and every Good Friday, we face squarely into the journey of our Lord and Savior and Friend, Jesus Christ, to his death. And every Sunday, we remember. Together, as we pray in thanksgiving, we say, “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” “We remember his death. We proclaim his resurrection. We await his coming in glory.”

We began our service today with a time of prayer and remembrance of those who have died of COVID. We tolled a chime 98 times. Similarly, on Wednesday at our Noonday Prayers in this Holy Week, we concluded our intercessions by tolling our steeple bell 98 times – one time for every 10,000 people that have died of the coronavirus in this country, 985,000 over the past two years. It was physical work to ring the bell that many times. It was a way of praying that brought home to us the reality.

We remember. It is too easy to forget. We remember. Just as we remember other deaths, other injustices and cruelties, other betrayals and denials and abandonments. We remember, not to wallow in sorrow, but to grieve and mourn, to look with courage and conviction at the world as it is and as we have made it, to honor.

It would have been just fine with the Judean leaders and the Roman rulers if Jesus had just been forgotten, like so many other Zealots or upstart teachers before him and after him. It would have been just fine if the whole matter of Jesus’ declaration of a new kingdom that raises up the lowly had been buried with him in the tomb.

On this Good Friday, we remember with intense directness this truth, that Christ Jesus died. Jesus was put to death. God incarnate, God-with-us, was killed.

And we sit with the experience of Jesus’ followers in those hours and days after his death – the experience of incredible loss, incredible sadness, incredible fear and uncertainty.

Those who work with people who have experienced trauma talk about the long journey through a fog-filled wilderness of no clear direction. They talk about how the traumatizing experiences and memories can have mastery over us even while we are trying to keep them at bay. They talk about how trauma intrudes on our ability to hold ourselves, time, and place together.

A key part of healing from trauma comes with slow, gentle, but steady steps in remembering and retelling the story. At first, what comes out may be wildly disorganized, a bit all over the map. But in time, as we continue to return, we find that we are able to gain more mastery over the story, and it becomes clearer to remember and to tell. In time, we will find that we can tell the story not only to ourselves but to others, and not only from a position of having been terribly wounded but from a position of wanting to speak so that others know the truth and step into a place to call people to a new path, to prevent it from happening again, to let others know there is life beyond it.

Right now, on this Friday, we are in the fog that feels like a pathless, sightless landscape. Jesus Christ has died – has been killed – has purposefully gone forward into this shameful public death. And with the disciples we may find ourselves wondering, “What was it all for?” We have been following this One who declared that now God’s kingdom begins, and there is good news for the poor, recovery of sight for the blind, freedom for the captives, release for the oppressed, food for the hungry, favor from God. And now, well, what kind of sense are we to make of it all? How are we to go on, now that we have lost the One who opened the gates of love for us and within us? It leaves us raw.

Friends, this is the reality of death.

But Jesus faced more than death. His death was beyond what we can know. Yes, his torture and cruel execution were beyond what any of us will know – although as humans through the ages we have been even more inventive in creating cruel tortures and forms of execution. His bodily suffering was not all. The pain that the Beloved experienced in body was far exceeded by the pain that the Beloved experienced in mind and heart, in soul.

The sorrow for the world for which he gave himself and for what seemed like the end of a beautiful kingdom of God.

The weight of human sin and suffering, across all time and place.

The anguish of feeling abandonment even by God. The anguish of God divided.

This is the power of God on display – even here – and especially here. God incarnate, God-with-us, stepping fully and willfully into the maelstrom of human cruelty, betrayal, denial, abandonment, mockery, and outright rejection. God incarnate in Jesus, one with Jesus human nature and being, suffering willingly all that is brought on him. God experiencing that sense of division that has plagued the human race from its earliest days, even within God’s own self, so that it is God incarnate crying out to God, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” God who willingly sacrifices God’s own life in love for a humanity that had broken and was continuing to break itself and the world.

It is a movement unthinkable to the powers of the world.

Oddly, here as this path of betrayal, denial, mock trial, torture, and cruel execution unfolds, is where Jesus in the Gospel of John says, “Now is the Son of Man glorified.” And Jesus ends saying, “It is finished – it is completed – it is accomplished.” The cross becomes the place of God’s full glory, in this

full contact with human suffering and cruelty, and with death itself. It is a journey that Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, God incarnate, is ready to take and was always ready to take. And so, Jesus steps into the oncoming maelstrom and, as he had done all along in his ministry, asks revealing questions. “Whom are you looking for?” “Am I not to drink of the cup the Father has given me?” “Why do you ask me?” “Why do you strike me?” Jesus calls us all to honesty about ourselves in this journey.

So today, we remember. We look squarely at death. We recall and even dare to put ourselves close to the scene of this cruel trauma that God entered willingly, that has shaken the core of the Creator of the universe. And we retell the story. And, even while we wait for just a little while to proclaim the wonder of the resurrection, we allow ourselves to be in the space of foggy unknowing. Because we can face this trauma knowing that there is another side that is unimaginably bright and different – the power of Resurrection awaits.

One of the colleges my daughter Cassie is considering is a Lutheran school, Valparaiso University, which has an incredible modern university chapel. You walk into the space and it is clean and bright. But your eyes are drawn to the front where, surrounded by stained glass windows from floor to high ceiling, a figure of Christ with arms raised high in victory in front of the cross, rises from behind the altar with arms raised heavenward. It is glorious, an incredible image of the risen Christ Jesus. So, the whole chapel is drawn toward this sign of Christ’s resurrection.

But chapel is on a sloping hillside, and the altar area is raised above the ground level. One floor beneath the altar is a round chapel that is darker, and certainly shorter in height. In the center of that chapel behind its altar is a crucifix with the body of Jesus curled over in pain. The body is sculpted in woven strips of iron that has a rusty tone.

We cannot find resurrection without death. Resurrection rises from and depends upon the grave.

And, resurrection makes it possible to face death squarely. This death is not the end of the story.

We turn our hearts to Christ our God in prayer for this world for which he gave himself, fully and willfully, even to such cruelty. For God holds the whole world in that embrace, from the cross.

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you – because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.