

GOOD FRIDAY
Reading I: John 18:1-11
April 18, 2003 ~ All Saints, Pasadena ~ Susan Russell

Jesus is betrayed.

The life – the promise – the light that shone so brightly will soon be extinguished – ending in agony hung between two thieves on a hill called Golgotha. At the end of the day all that will remain of the rabbi from Nazareth will be a broken body and the broken dreams of his scattered followers. The Kingdom he proclaimed has not come. The powerful remain powerful: the oppressed remain oppressed -- and where there had been hope there is only despair. This is the stark truth of this day we dare to call "Good Friday."

What is there in that message for us today?

Let's be honest: we already know that this is not the end of the story. We gather this afternoon for the Liturgy of Good Friday with the Easter dress hanging in our closet; the flowers ordered; the brunch planned and the candy ready to go in the baskets. We've peeked at the last chapter to see how the book comes out. We've seen this movie before and know that there's a happy ending.

One question is: Can we be present in the reality of Good Friday, knowing that Easter happens?

Another question: Why bother? Couldn't we just skip Good Friday? Clearly that's an option. Look around you: I think I'm safe in saying that there'll be a few more folks with us on Sunday morning. Folks who happily go straight from Palm Sunday to Easter Day without the Holy Week stuff. Couldn't we just skip this part - - why dwell on it? We just heard the story of the crucifixion on Palm Sunday: just like we've heard it every year. It is possible to hear it again today in a way that isn't just "the same old thing"?

When my children were tiny, I sang in the choir at St. Paul's in Ventura. Since their father attended church sporadically, it fell to my friends Bruce and Lori to "pew sit", and so my boys joined their two girls, Kimmie & Alex during many a service.

I remember one such occasion when from the choir loft, during the reading of the passion, I looked down and saw all four of them -- intently coloring on the back of their bulletins -- seeming oblivious to the liturgy surrounding them. All of a sudden, Kimmie, who was about four, stopped coloring and began to listen to the unfolding story.

She'd been in church since before she was born -- an *Embryonic* Episcopalian: which is one better than a "Cradle Episcopalian." So she'd heard this story many times, even for such a little one. She could sing "There is a Green Hill Far Away" from memory. She had filled up her "He is Risen" coloring book. But on this particular day, she was listening like she'd never heard the story before.

When the gospel got to the words, "because he was already dead", she suddenly stood up and said (in a loud, horror-filled voice) "Jesus is DEAD? They KILLED JESUS???" And she started to cry in a way that made it very clear: this story she'd heard over and over again she had just heard, in some very profound way, for the first time.

And, as she was carried out of church on her daddy's shoulder, she was inconsolable -- so were we. At four years old, she entered into the pain and suffering of the crucifixion event -- and in experiencing that pain herself, was changed by it -- and so were we.

I am baffled by how we can hear these stories of Lent and Holy Week and not be changed by them. Don't we get it? Who was repelled by the teachings of Jesus? Who felt that Jesus was teaching false doctrine? Who wanted this man to "go away" at any cost?

It was the righteous; the orthodox; the people who knew how to do it correctly. It was the holders of the power. It was the people who knew the rules: and knew how to make sure everyone *else* kept them. How can we hear this message - this story - and not be confronted by that? How can we ignore the sin of self-righteousness in the voices who cried "Hosanna" and turned so quickly to the crowd which cried "Crucify Him". And crucify him they did. The crowd got what they asked for.

I don't want to be part of that crowd. I don't want you to be part of that crowd. But that's the risk we run if we skip Good Friday. If we fast-forward to Easter, we avoid confronting in ourselves our own self-righteousness, our own certainties, our own fears. We also avoid being transformed by them.

Robert Shahan, the Bishop of Arizona, once said, "Faith is what you are willing to die for. Dogma is what you are willing to kill for."

And so Jesus was betrayed – one willing to die handed over to those willing to kill. He came with a willingness to die for the sake of the message that the Kingdom of God is at hand – the Reign of God is in reach. It is here. It is now. He came with a message of inclusiveness that threatened the powerful – a message of compassion that challenged the complacent.

Compassion is what Kimmie experienced on that Good Friday: compassion in the truest sense of the word. The Latin word for passion means "suffering": the combined form of "compassion" means "with suffering." It is an invitation to join, to be a part of something requiring sacrifice and often pain. For us, this Good Friday, it is an invitation to join and be part of the crucifixion story.

Not a very inviting invitation, is it? Not a message that sells any better in Pasadena than it did in Jerusalem. Like the disciples who fled from the Garden of Gethsemane, we don't want a Dead Rabbi: we want a Risen Lord.

The paradox is that it's precisely because we have already experienced the Resurrection that we can enter into the crucifixion: not just on Good Friday, but wherever and whenever we face the choice between self-righteousness and compassion.

What we have to offer is a faith to die for: not a dogma to kill for. What we have to proclaim is a Gospel of that can truly enter into those places of darkness and suffering where compassion is the only gift we have to give. It is ours to give, as the Body of Christ, because our Lord went there first. It is ours to give when we reach out to the oppressed and the persecuted. It is ours to give when we proclaim the Gospel to those who have never heard it before –and to those who have never before heard that the Gospel includes them.

Like most of you I began my Lenten journey on March 5th – Ash Wednesday – with a smudge of ash on my forehead, the words “remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return” echoing in my ears and 40 days of prayer and preparation stretching in front of me. But Good Friday came early for me this year. On Thursday, March 6th I was wakened in the middle of the night by a phone call with news that Alan – my friend and former rector – was suddenly and tragically dead.

And his partner, Alec, was asking for me. That awful night -- driving through dark and empty streets in a fog of grief and confusion -- I wasn't even sure what to pray for. All I could come up with was "Be with us." Be with us ... in this night of suffering and darkness where compassion is the only gift we have to give.

Compassion was the only gift we had to give -- and I had the privilege of seeing it given over and over again. By the wardens of the parish who joined me to sit with Alec through that long, sad, first night alone. By the bishop and diocesan staff members who reached out to pastor both Alec and the congregation in their grief in the days immediately following. In the power of a Requiem Eucharist which gave us room to both celebrate Alan's life and to grieve his death.

The Body of Christ -- incarnated in the people of St. Peter's, San Pedro -- had journeyed with Alec into those places of darkness and suffering where compassion was the only gift we had to give. And in an amazing moment of grace -- as he mourned the death of his beloved partner -- Alec came forward to receive communion for the first time at Alan's Requiem. Afterwards he said, "Everyone always said I was welcome before, but I never really believed it until now." And so he was fed by the bread of new life ... drank of the wine which gives us strength for the journey.

In some mysterious way, just as Kimmie heard for the first time that Jesus had died, Alec understood for the first time that the Body of Christ was alive ... and that it included him ... and that he was loved and accepted and welcome at the table.

Good Friday gave way to Easter. And we weren't even a week into Lent.

What I have come to understand during this Holy Lent is that the point of the prophetic IS the pastoral. That everything else we do or say, proclaim or plan, strategize or organize pales in comparison to the stark privilege of entering into those places of darkness and suffering where compassion is the only gift we have to give. I am more determined than ever that this shall be a church where whoever you are -- wherever you are on your journey -- when the worst thing that could possibly happen to you happens ... as it did to Alec on March 6, 2003 ... you need not enter that darkness and suffering alone. That you can count on the Body of Christ to go with you ... to cry with you, sit with you, pray with you, wait with you ... and for the Risen Lord to be present in the bread and in the wine ... in the holy food of new and unending life ... to give you strength for the journey.

For now, our journey has brought us again to this Good Friday ... this crucial point in the symphony that is Holy Week. Palm Sunday was our overture: touching on all the themes to be played throughout the week and leading us into the subsequent movements. And now we've arrived at Good Friday: in some ways the "adagio" of the piece. In the hours between now and the "allegro" of Easter, we sit in the silence and contemplate the power of this story that is ours.

May God give us the grace to enter with compassion into the death of Our Lord -- even as we prepare with Joy to Celebrate His Resurrection. Amen.