

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
April 10, 2020; Good Friday, Year A

SCRIPTURE

John 19:1-16

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. {2} And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. {3} They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face. {4} Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him." {5} So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" {6} When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him." {7} The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God." {8} Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. {9} He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. {10} Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" {11} Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." {12} From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor." {13} When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. {14} Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" {15} They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." {16} Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

SERMON

"Now It's Real"

Rev. Martin McGeachy

This year, Holy Week, with its sad, melancholy hope for the coming resurrection has taken on a new meaning, It's one thing to preach in the abstract the suffering of Jesus for all of humankind, and another to see all of humankind suffering, and try to find resurrection in the midst of it.

I had a strange encounter at the grocery store yesterday. Even going to the grocery store is a fearsome challenge these days. For one thing, when you're masked, you can't see expressions on faces. Normally, in a small town, you get a lot of smiles from strangers as you bump carts, or together roll your eyes at prices. Not to mention seeing people you know all the time. And I did see one fellow and wonder if he was who I thought he was, but we didn't make eye contact. It's amazing how when you're wearing your mask, you feel so cut off from everyone without seeing faces that eye contact seems oddly out of place. So I was pleased to have one of those anonymous friendly moments when I, in my hazmat outfit, was six feet from a middle aged man who was fresh as a daisy, unencumbered by any protective gear, and we're looking at the empty shelves, six feet apart, and he says, "This is crazy!" And I smiled (secretly) and said, "I know, right?" and started to move on, and he suddenly says, "no cooking oil—I can't make my wings? Now this is real!"

OK, I know he was making a joke. But I found myself ticked off by the attitude of this unmasked, ungloved man. He wasn't young, but I know he wasn't old enough to have lived through the rationing of WWII, like some of you did, or lived through the deprivation of the Great

Depression, like most of our parents did. If the worst thing that happens to me in this time of pandemic is that my chicken wings aren't greasy enough, I am blessed indeed. I saw a meme on Facebook at the beginning of our isolation that said, "Your grandparents were called to war. You're being called to sit on your couch. You can do this." But for people of faith, journeying through Holy Week to a strangely disconnected Easter, we're called to more than binge-watching Netflix. Among other things, we're called to be aware that we are in this together, that every person in the world is in danger—a reminder that in good times and bad, our humanity is inextricably intertwined with every other person on the globe, so that whenever we can, we pray for and help others, whether those others are of another color, another religion, another country, another sexual orientation, another political party. We're called to love our neighbor, and share in their suffering, as Jesus does, and this pandemic all too real for our neighbors in Italy, China, Danbury and New Rochelle, or perhaps next door. It's real for all who are experiencing sickness, hunger, isolation, and death. It's real for those whose relatives are sick and dying, but who are forbidden from seeing, touching, or even saying goodbye.

And Good Friday feels all too real this year. I remember another Good Friday, decades ago, that became very real for me. When I was a young pastor, one Lenten season, I got a call in my office one day from a friend, with this shocking announcement. "Jay Randall just dropped dead!" Jay was a friend of mine, in seeming good health—and we were the same age. His became the first funeral I ever preached for a close friend. I comforted his new widow, barely in her thirties, and walked the family to the tomb. That Good Friday felt very real for me, and oddly, my heightened grief also brought me heightened comfort in my faith. What makes Good Friday real? Suffering. We suffer as Jesus did, and He suffers as we do.

Suffering makes it real. But what makes it Good?

Remember that it's Good Friday. *Because* Jesus was in pain, because he felt forsaken from God. Our Lord was in isolation and facing death, watching the virus of hatred and cruelty wash over the people he had preached to for three years. Our God doesn't just put us in places of pain and abandon us, or look the other way. Ours is a God who has been there, and felt every pain we have, feels every pain we do, is with us in every fear and doubt, and in that mixture of agony and faith, Jesus releases his soul into God's hands, and goes to death, taking away our sins, and clearing a path for us to bliss. This day is Good because today is the day when he proved that he was with us in our physical pain and distress, and provided a path out of the tomb. It is in the very blackness, emptiness of this moment, that victory is won, and that the darkness is overcome for all time. It is Good. It is God. And yet, it's so hard. He was not lifted off that cross, and neither are we rescued from what we have to walk through. God won't magically make us not get sick if we ignore science and throw ourselves a church party. When the Bible refers in Mark 16 to people of faith being able to heal the sick, handle serpents and drink poison safely, that's not a promise of superpowers if we are Good enough Christians, or believe hard enough. It's a metaphor for the reality of the promise of this night. That when the serpents strike us down, and when the poison sickens us, even unto death, we will YET live.

One of my seminary professors told me that many scholars believe that the second half of Mark 16, which closes the Gospel with those verses about the great powers of true believers and the awesome ascension of Jesus into heaven, is actually an ending added to the book sometime later. The original ending of Mark stops abruptly at verse 8. The disciples have just discovered the empty tomb, and an angel tells them that Jesus has been raised. And the Gospel stops, completely predictably, with this: "And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." The End. Sounds about right. Does that mean the rest of the chapter isn't true? No,

the suggestion is that it was added later, when the resurrection had become real to the disciples.

But again, for resurrection to be real, the tomb must be real. So thank you God this Good Friday, not for the pain, but that the pain leads us to the bliss. Thank you that we are nearing Resurrection, and our trial and fear and imprisonment in the tomb creates the path out into the light. Thank you that you have redeemed our pain as you have redeemed our souls. Thank you that you are real, and your promise is certain. Amen.

THE PASSION READING

Mark 15:22-32

Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). 23 And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. 24 And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

25 It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. 26 The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." 27 And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. 29 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, 30 save yourself, and come down from the cross!" 31 In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32 Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

THE SEVEN SAYINGS OF THE SAVIOR ON THE CROSS

1. The Word of forgiveness (Luke 23:34). And Jesus said, "**Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.**"
2. The Word of salvation (Luke 23:42). The thief said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom;" and Jesus replied, "**Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.**"
3. The Word of affection (John 19:25-27). There stood by the cross of Jesus His mother. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, He said to His mother, "**Woman, behold your son.**" Then He said to the disciple, "**Behold your mother.**"
4. The Word of anguish (Mark 15:34). At about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "**Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?**" which means, "**My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?**"
5. The Word of suffering (John 19:28). Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, said, "**I thirst.**"
6. The Word of victory (John 19:30). When Jesus had received the vinegar, He said, "**It is finished.**"
7. The Word of contentment (Luke 23:46). Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "**Father, into your hands I commend My spirit.**" Having said this, He breathed His last.