



Good Friday

Training Ground

[RCL] Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

A blessed Good Friday to you, as we remember the death of Jesus, the one who loved us to the end.

Good Friday brings us face to face with something we spend our lives trying to avoid: Death.

On either end of this journey of Lent, we find ourselves needing to look death full in the face. On Ash Wednesday, we are asked to look at our own mortality.

On Good Friday, we are asked to look as even the Son of God embraces death.

Good Friday is a training ground.

Today, on Good Friday, we are asked not to look ahead to Sunday, but to sit here, at the foot of the cross. At the entrance to a grave. Today, we have to do what we do throughout life when beloved people die; we are asked to walk away in sadness.

Let's not skip ahead. Good Friday has something to teach us.

The disciples did not know that Sunday would bring relief. The disciples did not know that Jesus would be resurrected. The disciples did not know that there was any hope. They walked away in sadness. They hid in fear.

The disciples sat where we sit when someone we love dies. Because it is common knowledge that when people die, they typically do not come back to us in three days.

Good Friday is a training ground.

Because as much as we would like to avoid it, death is coming for each of us. Death is coming – for each of us and those we love.

Good Friday teaches us to look at death, to accept it as reality, to have patience with it. Because Jesus did it first.

Good Friday teaches us that when we are at our lowest, God is there. Good Friday teaches us that when we suffer, God is there. Good Friday teaches us that when we all inevitably face the reality that is death, God is there. God has been there. God will be there. Even in the depths of the grave. Good Friday teaches us that there is *no* grave that we could go into — literally or figuratively — in which God cannot reach us.

In the gospel text for the day, we hear the story of Jesus' death as told by John. While the other gospels feature miraculous happenings when Jesus dies, like tombs being opened or the curtain of the Temple being torn in two, in John, we do not hear of those. For whatever reason, the evangelist does not choose to feature those occurrences. Because it is generally accepted that John was the last gospel to be written, we can safely assume that the fourth evangelist *knew* about them, but they are simply not featured in his writing.

No, instead, in John's gospel, Jesus simply breathes his last. Jesus simply dies. Fittingly, for a gospel in which Jesus is the love of God made flesh for the sake of the world, Jesus simply dies the death of a human. Just like us.

Also fittingly, Jesus does what many people do when they know that they are about to die. He takes care of his friends. He takes care of his mother. He gives the beloved disciple to his mother, and she to him, to care for one another.

After he dies, we meet a character that we also met in chapter 3 of John: Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee who first came to Jesus by night. It was to Nicodemus that Jesus said his famous words in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

After Jesus dies, Nicodemus shows that Jesus' words that night had an impact. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea show up to collect Jesus' body and bury him.

Yes, we know the end of the story. We know that Jesus will be resurrected. We know that Sunday is coming.

But on Good Friday, we are asked to forget that we know the ending. We are asked to sit with death and accept its reality because God endured death first.

Good Friday is a training ground.

Good Friday reminds us, every single year, that death is a reality that we must face, but that we need not be afraid because Jesus has endured it first.

Caleb Wilde authored the book “*Confessions of a Funeral Director: How Death Saved My Life*.” He is a sixth-generation funeral director who has spoken and written extensively about death and how we like to avoid it, and when we cannot, to outsource it to professionals. He has also made a writing career out of the virtues of learning to accept death.

He writes,

“I don’t like being around people who haven’t been touched by death, who haven’t embraced mortality.

Death humbles us. I don’t like proud people.

Death brings us closer to our mortality. I don’t like people who feel invincible.

Death brings unanswerable questions. I don’t like people who have all the answers.

Death trains us in silence. I don’t need people in my life who try to fill silence with words.

Death unites me with every human, every thing — past, present and future — on this planet and beyond. I don’t need people who separate themselves, blinded to this universal connectedness.

Death helps us befriend sadness. Toxic positivity is real and I can do without, thank you very much.

Death is the great iconoclast for superficial achievements. I don’t want to hear about your career, your degrees, your bank account and success. Show me your soul.

Death is the permanent reminder that we’re human. I’ve been around those who try to be the god of their world and I can do without them.

Death is where I meet you, where you meet me. And that’s all I want. All the other [stuff] isn’t worth this small amount of time I have to experience the magic and mystery of this cosmic miracle we call life.

Turns out those who are full of life are those who’ve embraced death. Those are my people.”

So let us, here on Good Friday, embrace death with Jesus.

Let us, here at the end of the Lenten season, look mortality full in the face, as we have been asked to do from the beginning. And in our looking, let us remember that there is no grave, literal or figurative, in which God cannot find us. Because God has, as always, gone before us.

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If Good Friday unsettles us, it is because death unsettles us. Let us embrace that we are finite. Let us embrace that our lives are temporary. And may that make us more fully alive.

And let us embrace the hope of Good Friday: That while death is the worst thing, the hope we have in Jesus is that *the worst thing* is never *the last thing*.

We are dust, we are mortal, and we are bound for the grave.

But the Good news, beloved, is that Jesus has gone before us to the grave.

And where Jesus is, there is hope – on Good Friday and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Anna Tew is a Lutheran pastor based in South Hadley, Massachusetts. She has served a fantastic little parish called Our Savior's Lutheran Church for seven years. Anna was born and raised in Alabama and considers Atlanta her second home. She graduated from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in 2011 and has served in a variety of settings since then, including both parish ministry and hospital chaplaincy. In her spare time, she enjoys hiking, CrossFit, and music of all kinds.