



SERMONS
THAT WORK



SERMONS FOR *Holy Week and Easter 2021*

An offering of
Sermons That Work

THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

Holy Week 2021

Dear Reader,

Thank you for downloading *Sermons for Holy Week and Easter 2021*, a collection of materials prepared by some of the best preachers from across The Episcopal Church.

Sermons That Work, a ministry of The Episcopal Church's Office of Communication, has provided free and high-quality sermons, Bible studies, and bulletin inserts since 1995.

Every week, it is our pleasure to source, review, and publish these pieces; we hope they are edifying as you hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these and their corresponding scriptures.

In January 2020, in order to meet the demands of a production schedule, I wrote a welcome letter for last year's compilation of Holy Week sermons. These are not fun letters to write; luckily (I guess), the cold and darkness of winter in Minnesota provides a fitting setting in which to write on death, mourning, sadness, and the hardness of the human heart.

But no cold night could have prepared me – or any of us – for what was to come.

As February and early March of last year unfolded, there was little to suggest the cataclysmic events of 2020 were

approaching. And suddenly, worship services were cancelled and put online. And travel plans were cancelled. And schools were closed. And work went fully remote for many of us. And then the sickness and death spread around our communities, upending nearly everything that we had worked hard to plan, to create, to do. For more than a year, we have felt completely powerless – longing for something, anything, to prop us up a little longer.

I don't write that purely to revisit very, very hard times. I also don't write it with a rosy ending in mind, turning the pandemic into a morality play – no, we have lived through a bad time indeed, afflicted by disease, economic uncertainty, rampant hunger, failing businesses, mental health calamity, lost years of education and sobriety and work and time with our friends and families, and so, so much more.

Rather, I am revisiting where we have been because we need to keep going. This path, while long, has been punctuated with heroic ministry by our congregations and dioceses. While we have felt lonely, we have not been abandoned – not by God, not by the Church - this we know. But there are many more who do not know this. This year, we have a particular urgency around sharing the love of our Lord with our devastated communities. It will take a lot of effort and strength, but most importantly, it will take courage. So, like Jesus, we set our faces toward Jerusalem, walking together through pain and toward Resurrection.

On behalf of Sermons That Work and The Episcopal Church's Office of Communication, I wish you a blessed Holy Week and a joyous Easter.

Your brother in Christ,
Christopher Sikkema
The Episcopal Church

The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

COLLECT

Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for the human race you sent your Son our Savior Jesus Christ to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

READINGS:

ISAIAH 50:4-9A; PSALM 31:9-16; PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11; MARK 14:1-15:47 OR MARK 15:1-39, [40-47]

IT'S HOLY WEEK. SO WHAT?

by the Rev. Anna Tew

With so much going on in the world, it may seem almost silly to insist on giving so much time and energy to the religious observance of Holy Week. This is especially true when one considers that so many people around us may only pay attention on Easter at best, and even that, for some, is at least partially out of obligation.

Add the difficulties of the pandemic on top of that, and the fact that most churches still cannot meet in person, and Holy Week itself may begin to feel a bit out of touch with the world around us.

We alone do not have precise answers for the human suffering that we see around us, for violence or death or

disease — or where to find hope. What we do know, however, is that the narratives that form us — the stories of our families, our country, our faith — are the eyeglasses through which we see the stories on the news and the things around us. It's through those stories that we come to conclusions about ourselves and our world and what is hopeless and what is redeemable. It's through those stories that we see ourselves and our places in the world.

If your family story is that the people in your bloodline are giving and caring people, then you, too, will be encouraged to be generous and attentive. If we believe that America's story is one of ingenuity and bravery, then a true patriot will do their best to have courage and see creative solutions to even the most daunting problems.

Religious stories are even bigger than that. They tell us not only how we should live, but how we got here and where we're going. During Holy Week and Easter, here in the northern hemisphere, we tell the story of the Resurrection just as we watch creation come back to life in the springtime.

This week, we religiously observant Christians have the opportunity to live through the story we proclaim, day by day: the story of the last days of Jesus Christ, his last meal with his friends, his death by execution, and an unexpected and joyous ending. We do so with our ancestors in faith, and we do so with those yet to be born, who will follow us in Holy Weeks to come.

Right when things seem at a tipping point in our nation and our world, this story is calling to us again, if we dare to see the world through it. We are invited to forget that we know how this Holy Week story ends and place ourselves into the story itself: to feel the palm branches, to taste wine and

bread, to feel cool water on our feet as they are washed, and to come and mourn at the foot of a wooden cross. Though most of us cannot experience many, if any, of these things in person this year, we remember how they felt, and we dare never take them for granted again.

In a world surrounded by disease, death, and suffering, we are being called to stare both love and suffering — God’s own love and suffering — in the face.

Our Holy Week story begins today, whether we grip actual palm branches this year or not. The palms we typically wave on Palm Sunday are burned the following year, as the story begins again.

We are called today into the story of Jesus – and called to pay attention to it anew. We have come to the holy city, Jerusalem, where Christ is entering, riding on a colt, or a donkey, or both, depending on which Gospel you read.

As Jesus rides along, a crowd begins to gather. Of course, this is before social media could gather people from all over the place in minutes, way back when members of a crowd had to hear and see and decide to gather on the spot. And the odd thing about the way the Gospels tell this story is that the city and the crowds become speaking characters.

As Matthew puts it: *“When [Jesus] entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’”*

Anyone who has ever loved a city — or any place, really — knows that places have personalities. Each place decides what it values, and it shapes everything from its streets to its rituals. Jerusalem here can be safely classified as “skeptical.”

It is a place where major religions are born, and messiahs are common.

And yet, a crowd still comes to gather around Jesus, the prophet and teacher who has been drawing huge crowds, the one who is rumored to have healed the sick and driven out demons and restored sight to the blind and even raised the dead.

The crowds gathered around God in the flesh, celebrating his arrival, shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” He was, they believed, the one to save them from oppression.

Jesus knows how this story will end. He knows it will be painful. But Jesus still shows up.

And Jesus will show up on Sunday whether or not any of us shows up, in whatever ways we safely can, to form our community around the story. Jesus will show up whether or not we choose to see our world through this story.

You may not be able to attend to this story as much as you would like. None of us can, really, for the second year in a row, because of the pandemic. You may also have work or family or school obligations or you may just be exhausted from all you have to do. That’s okay.

The Resurrection will happen anyway. It is an eternal truth. It happened once, and Christians around the world sing it and tell it again, every year, with or without our personal involvement.

We are each invited, however, to be part of it. To let this story form us. To see the world through it and maybe, just maybe, begin to answer some hard questions about

justice and peace and disease and suffering and death and resurrection and hope. So even if you can't attend to it the way you're used to or the way you might like — take some time to observe and ponder: Maundy Thursday and the Last Supper. Good Friday and the Crucifixion. Holy Saturday and the Great Vigil of Easter, as the Church retells the whole salvation story again.

We are in this story, now.

From now on, you are the crowds, even if we are physically apart. You are the disciples. You are the witnesses.

Forget that you know how this story ends. Learn again to see your world through new eyes, through the disciples' eyes, so that maybe we can find hope for justice and healing in the midst of the chaos and pain in the world around us. Because the disciples, in their world, also knew chaos and pain and fear and death.

Put on the eyeglasses of the story of Jesus, just for this week, again.

And as the Resurrection comes again to us next week, may we leave with hope renewed that surprise endings are possible, that hope is not lost, and that even Death is not greater than God, nor greater than love. That if Christ can rise from the dead, then surely, surely, there is hope for us. Let us tell the Story again. Amen.

The Rev. Anna Tew is a Lutheran pastor serving Our Savior's Lutheran Church in South Hadley, Massachusetts. A product of several places, she was born and raised in rural south Alabama, lived most of her adult life to date in Atlanta, and has called New England home for the past four years. Anna graduated from the Candler School of Theology in 2011, and since then she has served in both parish ministry and hospital chaplaincy. In her spare time, Anna enjoys keeping up with politics and pop culture (especially music), hiking, running, and CrossFit.

Monday in Holy Week

COLLECT

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

READINGS:

ISAIAH 42:1-9; PSALM 36:5-11; HEBREWS 9:11-15;
JOHN 12:1-11

CLOSENESS

by the Rev. Jazzy Bostock

This story of anointing, fragrance, intimacy, and risk – it’s a hard story not to love. And, this year, it seems particularly poignant – a reminder to hold those you love close, for we do not know how much time we have together. This year has been littered with loss and grief – and few, if any, of us had the foresight that Mary did – the foresight to lavish those we adore with our most costly perfume before the time came for us to part.

In our story, Mary has a pound of costly perfume. The gospel says it’s nard, but maybe you could imagine something from your mother’s bathroom counters, one of the heavy glass bottles filled with expensive scent – the kind you weren’t allowed to touch when you were young. Mary takes this expensive bottle and empties it, slathering Jesus’ feet in the

scent and leaning in to wipe off the dirt and the excess with her hair.

When we actually consider this – what it would be like to wipe someone’s feet with our hair – we might be horrified. Even without a year of social distancing behind us, this kind of closeness makes us squirm. Mary, though, is so overcome with love for Jesus that she transcends the norms and the barriers, and simply does what she feels is right at that moment. She makes an offering to the Savior she adores.

The disciples see this woman having an incredibly intimate moment with their friend, and they are disgusted. They think she is out of place, that she doesn’t belong where she has put herself. They comment that she is wasting her money, pouring it down the drain by using her perfume for this anointing. This moment must have been uncomfortable for them – the rich smell of the oil is around them, and Mary is kneeling with her face almost touching Jesus’ feet. Jesus puts a stop to their chatter. “Leave her alone,” he says. Jesus takes a moment that is being perceived by the disciples as ugly and makes us see it as beautiful. He ignores their discomfort and blesses this intimate moment. He consecrates it – making it holy and cherished.

In our world, this intimacy is rare, if not impossible, to come by. We are taught from when we are young that everyone has a personal bubble of space around them, and we need to appreciate that. We are not often encouraged to feel the Holy Spirit moving us toward intimate and close moments with friends; we are more often told to suppress that urge, lest we look weird, or out of place, or make someone uncomfortable. Living through a pandemic that has taught us to observe six feet of social distance has increased our isolation.

This gospel lesson challenges our sense of boundary, inviting us to overcome our fears and offer closeness even in platonic relationships. What would our lives look like if we loved Jesus like Mary did? This love is consuming and abundant – to be so overcome with love as to give away something precious and break the barriers of culture to be drawn into an even deeper and more intimate relationship with God.

Mary was overcome with the sense of needing to do something right now, and she followed her heart. Soon, Jesus would no longer be with the disciples. We are preparing now for Holy Week, preparing for Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. There is no better time than right now to show the people we love not only that we love them – but also the depth of that feeling. We are constantly reminded that life is short, and we are invited today to seize every moment we are gifted, and to turn those moments into sacred beauty by showing intimacy and vulnerability with one another.

The poor will always be with us, Jesus says. Perhaps we can also read this as our distractions, our problems, the difficulties and heartaches of this life will always be with us. But that doesn't mean we can't take the time to focus on one another, to be present and close and abundant and extravagant with our love for one another. Spending time with one another, showing our love, doesn't mean our work is finished. It doesn't mean that our to-do lists are empty, or that everything else is perfect. No – Jesus is blessing the time we spend together, blessing our falling in love with the Christ in one another, and blessing us as we are drawn into an intimate closeness of relationship. We are invited to hear the message of abundance and intimacy that Mary brings. We are invited to fall more deeply in love with Christ.

The Rev. Jazzy Bostock is a recently ordained kanaka maoli woman, serving her curacy at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Honolulu, Hawaii. She is thrilled to be back in the 'aina, the land, which raised her, and the waves of the Pacific Ocean. She loves the warm sun, gardening, cooking, laughing, and seeing God at work. She strives to love God more deeply, more fully, with every breath she takes.

Tuesday in Holy Week

COLLECT

O God, by the passion of your blessed Son you made an instrument of shameful death to be for us the means of life: Grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ, that we may gladly suffer shame and loss for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

READINGS:

ISAIAH 49:1-7; PSALM 71:1-14; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31; JOHN 12:20-36

UPSIDE DOWN

by the Rev. Joseph S. Pagano

In our epistle lesson, Paul deflates claims of believers who puff themselves up.

The First Letter to the Corinthians is addressed to a church experiencing divisions and scandals. A lot of them. Part of the problem seems to be a group of self-styled, super-spiritual people. As Paul puts it, they are “puffed-up.” They flaunt their superior wisdom. They demean others whom they considered socially and spiritually dull: *Très déclassé!*

The super-spiritual much preferred the sophistication and eloquence of Apollos’ sermons to Paul’s inarticulate ramblings. They spoke in tongues and didn’t much care if you were too stupid to understand. You were either in the know -- in the spiritual in crowd -- or not. They thought themselves above silly conventions about food and sex, and if their

outré behavior scandalized unenlightened blockheads, too bad for them.

In our passage from First Corinthians, Paul lets the air out of the balloon of the super-spiritual. He says, “the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” The proclamation of the cross punctures inflated claims to wisdom. Paul explains: “We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

Paul sets out a dramatic, counterintuitive contrast. For Gentiles, the idea of a crucified Lord is plain foolishness. How can a god be at once powerful and also executed by Rome? A famous caricature found in ancient Rome depicts a slave falling down before a crucified donkey, under which are the words, “Alexamenos worships his god.” That pretty much sums up the Gentiles’ response to the message of the cross: foolishness. As for Jews, the idea of a crucified messiah was an oxymoron. They looked for a messiah who would come and triumph over the Romans – not be executed by them. The claim that the crucifixion of Jesus was the center and climax of his messianic role was offensive: “Cursed is everyone who has been hanged on a tree” (Gal. 3:13; cf. Deut. 21:23). For the Jews, the message about a crucified messiah is scandalous.

The proclamation of Christ crucified turns things upside

down. Through the message of the cross, the wisdom of the world is made foolish. Through the scandal of the cross, weakness dethrones the powerful. The proclamation of the crucified Messiah is a sword of the spirit. To those who do not respond to this revelation, the cross is scandalous folly. For those who are being saved by this message, the foolishness and weakness of Christ crucified reveals the power and wisdom of God.

Paul uses a variety of metaphors to spell out the saving power and wisdom of the cross. At different times and in different places, Paul speaks of Christ's death in terms of sacrifice, redemption, representation, reconciliation, and conquest of the powers of sin and death. The height, depth, centrality, and expansiveness of Christ's death are beyond the grasp of one image, one metaphor, one theory, one human telling. They all, however, point to the action, initiative, and love of God in Christ. They all also bear fruit in a variety of responses: freedom from bondage, forgiveness of sins, reconciliation to God, righteousness, peace, cruciform lives and cruciform communities.

The wisdom of the cross is decidedly not the wisdom of the world. To Jewish scribes or Gentile philosophers, the message of the crucified Messiah can lead only to tripping over a stumbling block or doubling over in laughter. But for those who respond to such "foolishness," the proclamation of Christ crucified is none other than the power of God unto salvation.

Paul uses this message to take the wind out of the super-spiritual Corinthians' claims to wisdom and power. One wonders if Paul also thought the Corinthian elitists were putting on airs. He reminds them of their calling: "Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were

powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God." In this passage, Paul seems to be not only proving a point about the wisdom of the cross but also calling out the pretentiousness of the super-spiritual types. That is to say, not only does the word of the cross up-end the Corinthians' claims to wisdom and power, but Paul also points out that even by worldly standards, not many folks had much to boast about. It reminds one of the character Hyacinth Bucket, from the comedy "Keeping Up Appearances," who insists that her surname is pronounced "Bouquet." Or perhaps, for those of us who grew up with the Muppets, one thinks of Miss Piggy saying, "Pretentious? *Moi?*" Paul seems to be saying to the puffed-up Corinthians that not only are their ideas about wisdom and power at odds with the Gospel but also that they are acting like a group of poseurs in their claims to superior knowledge and abilities.

In addition to pointing out that the super-spiritual Christians were getting too big for their britches, Paul is also saying that the make-up of the church at Corinth is a demonstration of his radical claims about God's wisdom and power. Just look at yourselves, Paul says. Clearly, God is not impressed with worldly power or wisdom because God has called so few who are wise or rich or noble. Rather, God has called many who are "low and despised." The God revealed in Christ crucified has a preference for the lower rungs of society, overturns our ideas about who is wise and who is not, and makes somebodies out of nobodies. Paul reminds them that God "is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written,

‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” The crucified Christ is true wisdom and power because it is through him that we have received righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. When the puffed-up boast about their superior wisdom and abilities, it’s not just an instance of arrogance or pretentiousness. It’s to miss the whole point of the message about the cross. If anyone at Corinth feels the need to boast, let them boast in the crucified Lord.

It would be nice to tell ourselves that our churches today no longer experience division and scandal, that we no longer have problems with groups of Christians who puff themselves up with claims to superior wisdom and gifts, who demean other Christians whom they think unenlightened, who look with contempt upon other people’s vulgar practices or simplistic pieties. But we know that this is not so.

It is always easier to point out these attitudes in others. We think of proponents of the prosperity gospel whose message suggests that Jesus came to bring us bling rather than to call us to take up our cross and follow him on the way of costly love; or of Christian nationalists who seek to wield worldly political power rather than follow the crucified Lord who reigns from the cross; or of self-styled “strong” Christian believers whose promise “to pray for” others often comes across more as condescending dismissal of other peoples’ beliefs and practices than a sincere desire to build up the body of Christ; or of hip Christians in skinny jeans and statement glasses who are called to influence the influencers; and so forth and so on ...

But this is too obviously a case of the mote and the beam. How often have we heard fellow Episcopalians say, “In our church, we don’t have to check our brains at the door”? The clear implication of such a statement is that we are

wiser in our church than people in other churches where presumably they do check their brains at the door. How often have we heard Episcopalians speak condescendingly about the power and beauty of our Anglican liturgy, its rubrical infallibility, and with disdain about other Christians who wouldn’t know the difference between a fiddleback chasuble and a pair of PJs. Or how often in Anglican history have we defined ourselves as not like those neo-pagan papists or not like those holy rolling enthusiasts? All of which is to say, how often have we spoken of ourselves as possessing superior wisdom and looked down upon others whom we deem inferior?

This Tuesday in Holy Week is an opportunity to remember the message of the cross. Through the foolishness and weakness of Christ crucified, God reveals true wisdom and power. The word of the cross overturns all our ideas about worldly power and wisdom: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.” The proclamation of Christ crucified undercuts any basis for boasting of superior wisdom or super-spiritual gifts. If we must boast, then let us boast only in our crucified Lord. As our collect for today puts it: “O God, by the passion of your blessed Son you made an instrument of shameful death to be for us the means of life: Grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ, that we may gladly suffer shame and loss for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.”

The Rev. Joseph S. Pagano is an Episcopal priest who serves in the Anglican Parish of Pasadena and Cormack in Newfoundland, Canada. He is a faculty member in theology at Queen’s College in St. John’s, Newfoundland. His most recent book is Common Prayer: Reflections on Episcopal Worship.

Wednesday in Holy Week

COLLECT

Lord God, whose blessed Son our Savior gave his body to be whipped and his face to be spit upon: Give us grace to accept joyfully the sufferings of the present time, confident of the glory that shall be revealed; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

READINGS:

**ISAIAH 50:4-9A; PSALM 70; HEBREWS 12:1-3;
JOHN 13:21-32**

JOYFULLY

by the Rev. Canon Anna Sutterisch

Accept joyfully the sufferings of the present time? Don't you wish you could be the kind of person who could do what our collect says? You know, the kind of person who turns the other cheek, who never gets pulled into the petty, who responds to hate with love? Just how are we to accept sufferings joyfully? And... does Jesus really want us to?

The sufferings of the present time seem overwhelming. For many, the past year was horrible. Just last week, we marked the one-year anniversary of the first Covid-19 case in the U.S. Too many of us have an empty chair around the table, reminding us of the loved ones we've lost to this disease. You yourself might have lost a job, opportunities, joy, a sense of community. You might have experienced micro- and macro-aggressions, been ridiculed or bullied, been belittled or gaslighted or misunderstood. All of us, at some point this year, have felt lonely, scared, depressed, or anxious.

Throughout the hurt, you might have heard others say something such as, "There has always been evil in the world," or "It's always been hard, the hard things just change." Perhaps you've heard this from the generations of our elders, or that great cloud of witnesses, the saints of scripture. You may have been told that the oft-repeated word "unprecedented" has been too-liberally thrown around in this era's particular crises. Our own tradition reminds us that the sufferings have always been here. And it can be a helpful reminder that, like us, our ancestors have also struggled to carry them with grace.

For example, Isaiah. The excerpt from the prophet Isaiah we read today comes from the segment of the writings sometimes called the songs of the Suffering Servant. It was written at the beginning of the Babylonian Exile, when the nation of Israel was held in captivity and servitude, exiled from their Promised Land. The "Servant" voice in this passage fills a familiar place: calling on God for help navigating a difficult, lonely, hopeless world, while also trusting God's limitless grace and power. The servant attributes this wisdom to God. Because of God, the servant "may know how to sustain the weary with a word." It seems a bit aspirational, doesn't it, this desire to be able to suffer joyfully?

Our prayers on good days might sound similar to those of the prophet – seeking God's wisdom and strength to navigate exceedingly difficult moments. Our prayers on hard days might sound more fraught, perhaps like the prayers of the average people to whom the prophets were always prophesying!

"Is it okay to ask God to smite my enemies? Or do I have to pray for patience and forgiveness?"

Is it okay to ask God to stifle an irritating voice, to shut down an oppressive ego, to cause failure for a competitor? Or, in the words of the psalmist, must I “let those who seek my life be ashamed and altogether dismayed”?

Yes. Yes. Yes. God’s answer to the prayers of prophets and to people like you and me is always some kind of yes. God is able to hold all these prayers and respond to them by saturating us with grace. Grace, God’s one-way, no-strings-attached love for broken people who deserve anything but forgiveness.

Thankfully, the stories of our ancestors also include people who are broken, petty, hurting, and flawed – characters to whom it is easy to relate! Judas, perhaps one of the most demonized characters in our narrative, is also so explicitly human. How often have we betrayed Jesus out of ambition and selfishness – like Judas? How often have we denied Christ and our relationship with Jesus – like Peter? How often have we ridiculed or hurt Jesus – like the Roman centurions at the Cross?

In the Gospel of John, we get a glimpse into how Christ himself interacts with the brokenness of humanity. In the story, Jesus publicly acknowledges that one of his disciples – one of the friends with whom he travels, eats, sleeps, learns, shares – will betray him. The rest of the group is aghast, self-defensive, accusatory. But Jesus (perhaps calmly, perhaps sadly) accepts Judas’ fallenness. He tells him, “Do quickly what you are going to do.”

Jesus’ response to Judas is a blessing. Yes, Judas. It’s as if Jesus is telling us, “You are human and I can’t expect otherwise.” We love to demonize Judas, place him as the scapegoat, the personification of the betrayal of humanity against God. We

love to compare ourselves to Judas, reminding ourselves that we would never stoop to the wretchedness of betraying Christ himself! But the truth is, Judas is as human as the rest of us, our sibling in brokenness and pain. How often with our selfishness, ambition, and scarcity mindset do we indeed betray Christ in ourselves and in our neighbor?

The author of the letter to the Hebrews encourages the Christian community to focus on the community, the way of love, the example of Jesus, instead of lying in the ditch of our brokenness. To “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely” could be an expectation to live entirely without sin. But it could also be an invitation to not let sin muddle us down – to confess and repent of our sin and then to continue the Christian life. The grace of Christ Jesus means we don’t have to tally up our mistakes, our shortcomings, or dwell in guilt and self-flagellation. It means we can do the work of repenting, repairing, and reconciling, and then moving on. The gift of Jesus’ no-exception love means that we are not expected to grow weary with our shame and sin. It means we can feel the power and connection from our great cloud of witnesses, and be rejuvenated to persevere, to try again, to walk in the way of love.

Take a moment right now to honor your humanity, indeed, that is exactly what Jesus did at the Incarnation. If our God chose to feel the pangs and pains of a human body, certainly, so can we. By feeling the sorrow and fatigue that is intertwined with human experience, we honor our humanity. Can you honor the human? Can you honor everything your body, mind, heart, and soul have experienced this year, this month, this week, this day, this lifetime? Can you channel God’s grace and comfort, feel the love that comes not despite, but because of your humanity?

The grace of God is greater than the grace that we muster for one another. Thank God that God's expectation is not, in fact, for us to be perfect, but to be in relationship with Grace itself. Thank God that Jesus still loves us, still accompanies us. Despite and because of our very human brokenness, God offers all of us limitless grace.

The Rev. Canon Anna Sutterisch is the Canon for Christian Formation in the Diocese of Ohio, working with children, youth and young adults and serving as the Chaplain at Bellwether Farm Camp. She is passionate about new ways of being and doing church and sharing the Gospel in a way that is relevant and life-changing to today's people in today's world. Anna is a proud member of the inaugural class of the Bexley Seabury Seminary Federation (2019), and benefited greatly from its low residency program, which allowed her to receive her M.Div. while remaining rooted in her ministry context of Cleveland, Ohio. She lives there with her husband Noah and two beloved cats, Phoebe and Thecla. Prior to seminary, Anna worked at the intersection of faith and politics through the IAF doing interfaith community organizing.

Maundy Thursday

COLLECT

Almighty Father, whose dear Son, on the night before he suffered, instituted the Sacrament of his Body and Blood: Mercifully grant that we may receive it thankfully in remembrance of Jesus Christ our Lord, who in these holy mysteries gives us a pledge of eternal life; and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

READINGS:

**EXODUS 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14; PSALM 116:1, 10-17;
1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26; JOHN 13:1-17, 31B-35**

SHAME AND WONDER

by the Rev. Joslyn Ogden Schaefer

“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them fully,” or, as we’re used to hearing, “he loved them to the end.” Though this verse isn’t quoted as often as John 3:16, it conveys the marrow of the Gospel—the Good News of God’s unconditional love for humankind—in a way that burrows into our hearts. “What wondrous love is this?” as the old hymn says.

This thirteenth chapter of John, like the rest of the Gospel, is a meticulously crafted narrative that reveals a facet of Jesus unfamiliar to the synoptic writers. In John’s perspective, Jesus understands the earthly consequences of his ministry;

he knows he will be “glorified,” “lifted up” on the cross. And he knows that his disciples are slow to understand what servanthood and divine love look like in the world. So, he shows them by washing their feet: “I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” After supper ends, his teaching continues as he assures them that after he is gone, the Holy Spirit, Advocate and Guide, will be with them. He uses the imagery of a vinegrower, a vine, and branches to explain the interdependency and indwelling between the Father, Jesus, and us, his followers. He prays that they may be one, as he and the Father are one. All this teaching and praying goes on as Jesus and the eleven recline around a table after this Last Supper. Meanwhile, Judas is off scene, collecting 30 pieces of silver and guiding a detachment of soldiers to one of the disciples’ regular prayer places, the Garden of Gethsemane.

This night begins the three high holy days of the Christian year, the Triduum. We mark this night with a variety of rituals that help us enter the great Paschal Mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Some churches offer a simple Mediterranean meal that emulates what Jesus and his disciples would have eaten as they celebrated the Passover. Some conclude the service with the solemn stripping of the altar, rendering our reverently adorned spaces vacant and cavernous. And some of our churches offer hand- or foot-washing as part of the liturgy. This year, as we are in our second Covid-affected Lent, many communities will not physically share communion, much less wash feet, due to the proximity necessarily involved.

This foot-washing ritual, perhaps more than any other ritual we celebrate, evokes strong feelings in us. At best we feel reluctance: “I feel so uncomfortable, but maybe this is good for me.” But some of us just plain skip the service so we can

avoid it, or simply opt to pray in our pews instead of coming forward. Rest assured, this discomfort is not a contemporary phenomenon: you could hear it in tonight’s Gospel reading. But the reasons for the discomfort are somewhat different.

In Jesus’ time, foot washing was an act of hospitality in dusty Palestine, where everyone wore sandals. You’d enter someone’s home, be greeted with a bow, maybe a kiss, and then have a lowly servant bring water to wash your feet. In the Gospel, what Peter and the others are uncomfortable with isn’t the gesture of foot-washing—that was standard practice – but who was washing their feet. Jesus, the Holy One of God, the Lamb of God, the I AM—harkening back to God’s name revealed in the Burning Bush—who is the light of the world, bread of life, the true vine, the good shepherd, the way, the truth, the resurrection and the life. So, it was very disorienting for the disciples to have Jesus, the Son of God, strip down, don a towel, and kneel to wash their feet.

But Jesus is showing his disciples—all of them, including the denier Peter and the betrayer Judas – what it is to love them to the end, to love fully. What wondrous love is this?

In our current context, we are disoriented by foot-washing for all kinds of reasons. We might not be used to people washing our feet... except in the context of getting a pedicure when we pay someone to perform this service. While it can feel great physically to have someone wash your feet and paint your toenails, on an emotional level it feels awkward to watch a woman, generally of lower socioeconomic status, wash our feet, push down our cuticles, and trim our toenails. And yet... there are many folks reluctant to even wear sandals unless they’ve been to the nail salon!

This reluctance to show our feet until we've prettied them up gets to the core source of our contemporary discomfort with foot-washing: many of us feel shame.

We don't have much control over whether or not our feet stink, or if we have nail fungus, or bunions, or hammertoes. Our feet confront us with the fact that we are vulnerable and limited. Our feet point toward "original shame," as one theologian puts it. Shame tells us that we have some fundamental flaw, that we're fakes, that we're unworthy. Shame is a nearly universal experience; only sociopaths don't feel it, and it has gotten a bit more public attention recently through the research and teaching of social work professor Brené Brown. Understanding how we cope with shame and learning to integrate it, rather than build defense mechanisms to avoid it, is a central task in our Christian pilgrimage to love God, love our neighbor, and love ourselves.

Once and for all, Christ conquered our shame by entering into it. He died vulnerably, shamefully on the cross, but before he did, he offered guilty and shame-filled humanity forgiveness. Three days later, his bodily rising conveyed the infinite worth of the human body, the human person. Jesus' passion and resurrection are the fullest expressions of Jesus "loving us to the end."

While Christians accept this as true and may be able to appreciate cognitively the ultimate healing of shame through the passion and resurrection of Christ, most of us hunger to experience this healing on an affective and personal level. And the good news is that Christ sends his Holy Spirit, the Advocate, to heal our shame.

There is no better night in all of our church year to experience God's desire to heal our human shame than

Maundy Thursday.

Here we meet Jesus who invites us to his table, who takes the form of a servant, who washes our feet. We look down upon him awkwardly from our chairs, worrying if he smells our feet, or is grossed-out by the calluses. He isn't. He takes our feet gently, sees them for what they are, and washes them clean.

Here we meet Jesus who breaks bread with us, shares wine with us, and assures us that we are always welcome as we are: frail, vulnerable, sinners.

Here we meet Jesus who shows us what it is to be blessed, to get down on our knees before others who bear their own shame, who are imperfect, who are embarrassed, who feel unworthy, and wash their feet with the same gentle acceptance and clear-eyed love.

Here we meet Jesus who washes even Judas' feet, who shares bread and wine even with Judas.

"Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." We, friends, are among "his own." He loves each one of us "to the end" and bids us love another.

What wondrous love is this?

The Rev. Joslyn Ogden Schaefer serves as the Rector of Grace Church in the Mountains, in Waynesville, N.C. She has degrees from Davidson College, the University of Edinburgh, and Episcopal Divinity School. In this phase of life, most of her discretionary time is lovingly devoured by small children. Her two primary spiritual disciplines are child-rearing and sermon-writing, and she is regularly humbled by both.

Good Friday

COLLECT

Almighty God, we pray you graciously to behold this your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

READINGS:

ISAIAH 52:13-53:12; PSALM 22; HEBREWS 10:16-25
OR HEBREWS 4:14-16; 5:7-9; JOHN 18:1-19:42

BELOVED

by the Rev. Dr. Andrew M. Harmon

Today is a day that weighs heavy on the church. Each year during Holy Week, we hear the passion narrative; each year we resuscitate those familiar feelings, the anguish and disbelief, that accompany Jesus' death. And yet, each year it strikes differently. This year, the weight feels like nearly too much to bear. It feels like salt rubbed into a fresh wound, because this year, the death of our Lord is piled atop the personal and communal loss borne out of a pandemic and our gridlocked social-political landscape. Nevertheless, there is good news here, if we have ears to hear.

Details are in dizzying supply in John's passion narrative. There is the bloody sweat and Joseph of Arimathea's angling for Jesus' corpse. There is Pilate's existential question: *what is truth?*, and the people's insistence that a bandit go free while

Jesus stands condemned. There is the haunting mention that both the betrayal and burial take place in a garden, and the curious fact that it is mostly women who are named (and mostly named Mary) at the crucifixion.

These details, and so many others, buttress and ornament the dominant fact: they crucified him. So, with all the richness that drips from these two chapters, the central symbol remains straightforwardly the cross. It is the cross that bears down upon the church this day, even as the beams bore down on Jesus as he trekked up to Golgotha some two millennia ago. Like it or not, the cross has become powerful shorthand for our shared faith, for identifying something or someone recognizably Christian.

But the cross is a strange symbol to mark a people and a way, because it is a jarringly evocative reminder of death and defeat. Even that is softened a bit. To put a finer point on it: the cross was viewed as an instrument of government-sanctioned torture, of public humiliation and shame. Those who were crucified were made an example of; their death was seen as a horrifying, inhumane spectacle done to deter criminal activity.

It seems strange, if not a bit macabre, to display that in our places and spaces of worship. But the church has since its beginnings. It seems stranger still to plaster such a contentious image on bumper stickers and signs and turn it into necklaces. But that too has become increasingly common for many of faith. How do we in the church explain the cross? How can we, with the Apostle Paul, uphold it as the lynchpin of faith, the primary focus of preaching, the power to save for all who can stomach it?

How exactly the cross is the power to save has created something of a stumbling block for centuries in the church. In trying to make sense of the crucifixion, theologians and well-intending faithful folks have sought to unearth and reconstruct the scandalous logic of Jesus' death. Language of divine exchange and satisfaction, righteousness, and atonement populate theory after theory, all in hopes of unpacking precisely what the crucifixion affects and seeking to answer the question of why Jesus had to die.

The question of why Jesus had to die is, of course, tied to why he was killed in the first place. And why Jesus was killed certainly seems to stem from the things he said and did (or failed to say and do), specifically things having to do with the kingdom of God. Throughout the gospels, this kingdom is said to uphold and elevate those on the dark underbelly of society, those who were sick and poor and downtrodden. For those on the fringes in the earthly kingdom, the news had to sound promising. But for those in power, who brokered political and religious authority, the presence of this kingdom of God threatened to undermine the existing structures of power and domination.

Not only did Jesus announce the kingdom of God, he made that kingdom—one not of this world, he says repeatedly—a reality. It is a kingdom that trades in healing and grace, that runs on deeds of generous hospitality and God's justice. It was something unlike anything the world had ever witnessed. Maybe this is why those around Jesus had such difficulty in understanding the character and author of this kingdom. Maybe this was why Pilate asked questions like, "Are you the King of the Jews?" and "Where are you from?"

Jesus' answers (or non-answers) to these questions are wholly unsatisfying to Pilate's ears; the pieces fail to add up.

Exasperated, he washes his hands of Jesus' fate, leaving it to the will of the people. The remainder of the story comes too easily to mind. It comes too easily to mind because it is the story that plays throughout our days. The one in which one day we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the crowd, triumphantly shouting, "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord!", only to join in with the chorus a short time later, screaming, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" It is the same story that recounts how we will, at once, lay our cloaks down on a colt or on the street, paving the way for the unsuspecting king of kings, and in the next breath bid and barter for Jesus' clothes.

Still, Jesus did not shirk his mission and message. Right up until the end, he taught as one with authority, equipped with loving confidence in the One who sent him. Jesus was bound to incarnate God's love and presence in and for the world, and nothing, not even our fickleness, could disrupt that.

All of this reiterates the fact that we, as earth-bound humans, do not know what to do with love when we see it in its purest expression. We might curiously welcome it, poke and prod it. We might ask questions of it, try to tame and domesticate it. And yet, in the end, we are left searching still, so we kill it. Love is what got Jesus killed.

Perhaps this is what is so heart-rending about the cross. The cross reminds us of what we have made inevitable; it shows us, as Herbert McCabe has said, the "ultimate sin": how we can take life and love and contort it, make it dangerous, even fatal. But the cross also serves as a window into the heart of God, and as such, it is the central symbol of our forgiveness. At the cross, we see God's utter commitment to a world so often ambivalent to that love.

The cross communicates the deepest and most profound truth of the Christian tradition: you are loved by the God whose eternal power is love. When you fail to feel it or receive or return it, you are loved. When you buck against God's embrace like a two-year-old's late-afternoon tantrum, you are loved. When you avert your eyes from the Lord's outstretched arms on the cross, the most perfect expression of love—when you turn your gaze from it, from him—you are loved still.

This day, we behold our God, our Lord, who loved his own to the point of death. We see again the agonizingly beautiful continuation of a sacrificial life solely lived in and through love. The church is invited to cast its eyes upon the cross this day, remembering afresh the sobering terminal diagnosis and the life-giving possibility of love's way. Might we look anew on the one who was crucified to lead and educate us on this way. Amen.

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The Great Vigil of Easter

COLLECT

O God, who made this most holy night to shine with the glory of the Lord's resurrection: Stir up in your Church that Spirit of adoption which is given to us in Baptism, that we, being renewed both in body and mind, may worship you in sincerity and truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS:

EXODUS 14:10-31; 15:20-21; PSALM 114; ROMANS 6:3-11; MARK 16:1-8

KEEPING A SACRED VIGIL

by Katerina Katsarka Whitley

Throughout countless centuries, human beings have kept vigil for those they have lost or for causes that demand their awe and respect. From the deepest and most ancient memories of the human race come traditions related to death and dying and rituals that denote an effort to understand the greatest mystery of all—death. Each culture has its own rituals of respecting the dead, and most have observed a form of keeping vigil. Yet, as the details of our lives get more and more automated, so do our rituals become more abbreviated, and the solemn practices of honoring the body of the dead gradually disappear.

The frightful year of the pandemic has presented a new kind of vigil to hundreds of thousands of mourners around the

world. The sacred ritual of keeping watch over a loved one as he or she lies dying has been snatched from mothers, fathers, children, siblings, and friends by the cruel fact of contagion. Relatives have not been allowed to enter the hospitals, to hold the hands of their loved one. That task has fallen, again and again, to overwhelmed doctors and nurses. The vigil of love has become a vigil of distance and of fear. In a similar manner, those who had loved Jesus during his lifetime and ministry could not keep vigil with him because of the danger of imprisonment or death in the hands of hostile priests and their followers.

The Hebrews of the first century observed age-old rituals of burial. The family, most often the women, washed the body and rubbed it with olive oil. Afterwards, they used all the spices and perfumes they could afford to anoint it. The body had to be buried before nightfall on the same day of death.

After Jesus' horrific death on the cross, his body was broken and bleeding. It took great care to lower it from the cross and wrap it quickly in cloths—usually strips that wound around the body with a separate long cloth for the head. Because Joseph of Arimathea had approached Pilate with a request for the body of Jesus, Pilate, probably by that time feeling guilty in addition to being greatly irritated by the day's rushed proceedings, acquiesced. Thus, the body of Jesus was spared the ignominy of a common grave. Joseph was a rich man, so perhaps with help from a couple of servants, he carried the body to a prepared tomb, his own, newly purchased. It had to be done quickly because the Sabbath was approaching. So the body was left wrapped but in its frightful state from the cruelty of the cross. And then a huge stone was rolled to cover the entrance to the tomb.

All this happened before dark on Friday. A curtain now falls on the story, and we know nothing of what occurred during that sad night and the Sabbath that followed.

We can make some guesses because of our common humanity. Mary, the mother of Jesus, exhausted physically and emotionally from seeing her son tortured and dying on the cross has been led away by John, who promises to care for her as his own. Her agony is known only to herself. Only those who have lost a child can understand her unbearable sorrow that night and have kept vigil with her through the centuries.

The other women who had stayed with Jesus to the end, watching at the foot of the cross, keeping their own agonizing vigil, were Mary Magdalene, Mary Cleophas who was mother to two sons named James and Joseph, Salome, the mother of James and John, the Zebedees, and Joanna, whose husband was Herod's scribe. None of the men are present. Peter, distraught after his betrayal, is hiding somewhere in the city; John is with Jesus' mother, but the other nine disciples have dispersed, probably to Bethany, on their way to Galilee. So only seven disciples remain in Jerusalem—five of them women. Of those, only three are able to carry on the rituals of death. This is Mark's testimony. One is a young woman, Mary Magdalene, and two are older, mothers of grown men.

It is the first day of the week, so they leave their beds as early as possible, gather the bundle with the necessary cloths, water, oil, and spices and, heavy-hearted, trudge to the place marked as a wound in their memories, the tomb where Joseph had buried the Lord of Life. They make that painful walk in faith, because they have no idea how they can get to the body of the beloved master and friend, a body hidden

behind a great stone. Light is now breaking, and they can see their way, but still, they have no idea that anyone will be there to help them. Are they afraid of the dark, of being women alone, of those who murdered their beloved?

They must have been, but their love is greater than fear.

Now the light of the sun is making everything visible. And the worry about the heavy stone covering the entrance no longer matters. The stone has been moved. The tomb gapes empty. Mystified, they approach the entrance and bend to look inside. There is no body lying on the cold stone table. In the darkness, something white moves on their right and they are now terrified.

No wonder! Terror grips all of us—even those who claim not to believe—in the presence of the numinous. Three women have come in faith to perform a ritual of love and devotion. Now they are confronted by the unknown in a dark place of burial. The first words of the youth in white are strangely familiar: “Do not be alarmed.” The Greek word used here denotes awe, wonder, and terror combined. It’s not an ordinary word; this is not an ordinary experience. The women are already backing out of the cave, and they almost miss hearing the rest. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, the crucified. He has risen; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

They run back to their temporary home still terrified, unable to speak. And the tomb is never mentioned again. The disciples know that Jesus is not in the tomb. Mark’s report ends here. Something happened to the end of his manuscript. But the story did not end. It continues to this day. Soon, Easter Sunday will be upon them and upon us.

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Easter Day

COLLECT

O God, who for our redemption gave your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross, and by his glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of our enemy: Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS:

ACTS 10:34-43 OR ISAIAH 25:6-9; PSALM 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11 OR ACTS 10:34-43; JOHN 20:1-18 OR MARK 16:1-8

IN THE GARDEN

by Susan Butterworth

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

In this account of the Resurrection from the Gospel of John, we encounter Mary Magdalene in an intimate moment of great loss. Three times in these eighteen verses, she grieves in direct quotations:

- “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”
- “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”
- “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

We, the readers of John’s gospel, who experience the cycle of death and resurrection every year, know that Jesus’ body is gone from the tomb because he has been resurrected from the dead. But Mary doesn’t know that. All this woman wants at this moment is to tend to the body of her murdered, martyred spiritual companion, prophet, and teacher, the man who is so close to God that he can work healing miracles.

Mary Magdalene is sometimes conflated with Mary of Bethany or the unnamed sinful woman in Luke 7. The Mary Magdalene of John’s gospel has been described in more detail in Luke 8:1-3: “Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.”

It is widely accepted among secular historians that Mary Magdalene was a real historical figure. This Mary (a common name among Jewish women of the time) came from the Galilean fishing town of Magdala. She traveled with Jesus and supported him financially from her resources. A leader of the women who supported Jesus’ ministry, she was devoted to the holy man who had healed her of her demons. Jesus offered a gospel of hope for the oppressed that would have appealed to a woman with means and capability, who was restricted by traditional gender roles. Mary Magdalene was a female leader, a counterpart of Peter. She witnessed the crucifixion of Christ, and now she is the first witness to his resurrection.

The scene of the resurrection in John’s gospel is a garden. In Jerusalem, there are two possible locations for the site

of the burial and resurrection of Jesus. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, according to ancient tradition the site of the crucifixion and the tomb of Jesus, is a deeply moving place, a large and glorious place of worship, crowded with a diverse and international cast of Christians gathered in reverence and awe. The Garden Tomb, just outside the city walls, was excavated in the nineteenth century, and its proponents offered this new discovery as an alternate possibility to the traditional site. Wherever the historic Jesus was laid in the tomb, the site of the Garden Tomb evokes the scene in John's gospel, a quiet garden, with a water source and paths among olive trees, vines, and natural stone walls, where Mary Magdalene might have sat weeping, where, in her bewilderment, she might have mistaken the man she encounters for the gardener.

And then Jesus calls her by name, and she recognizes him. *Rabbouni!* she cries in the colloquial Aramaic. This is an intimate meeting; he appears to her alone, after Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, have departed. One imagines that Mary reaches for him, to touch him, to embrace him. But Jesus, her friend and teacher, steps back. He says to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father."

In hospice settings, at the bedside of the dying, those close to death, ready to cross the threshold between life and death, can be held to life by those watching at the bedside. It is not unusual for a patient to pass in the few moments while the watcher has stepped out, even only as far as the bathroom. The one on the threshold may need the watcher to let them go before they can pass over, as much as this may grieve the ones left behind.

Mary's attachment to Jesus, her desire to hold on to him, echoes the story of Elijah the prophet and his disciple Elisha. In 2 Kings 2:1-12, we read that when the prophet was about to be taken to God, Elisha refuses to let him go. Repeatedly, Elijah asks his disciple to stay behind. Repeatedly, Elisha says, "I will not leave you." The company of prophets reproaches him: "Do you not know that the Lord will take your master today?"

"Yes, I know," replies Elisha, "Be quiet!"

Finally, Elijah insists that he must go and is taken up into a whirlwind as Elisha watches him cross over the threshold to heaven. Then, like Mary, Elisha weeps.

Do not hold on to me, says Jesus, for he has not yet crossed over, ascended to the Father. This is the ultimate liminal moment. Jesus is between states, his humanity lingering before he crosses the threshold. John's telling of the Resurrection resonates with human grief and human death, with Mary's human grief for her human teacher, her spiritual guide. But Jesus is not crossing the threshold from life to death. Jesus is crossing the threshold to glory, to eternal life in God.

Go tell the others, Jesus instructs her, and Mary Magdalene announces to the disciples. "I have seen the Lord!"

This is the resurrection moment! With these words, we know that Christ has overcome death, that this passing from human life is something different, something unique, miraculous, salvific. Mary has seen God. She has seen her beloved Rabbouni crucified and laid in the grave, and she has seen him risen from the dead as her lord and savior. It is the ultimate revelation, the experience of Jesus as both human and divine.

I have seen the Lord! For Mary, as for us, sorrow and joy are integrally linked. At the empty tomb, in the quiet garden, our faith in the work and message of Jesus is affirmed. We go forward in hope, with purpose, to tell the others.

Let us pray: Jesus, our friend and savior, even in our sorrow at the grave, you are there. May we hear your voice when you call our name. May we see you; may we know you, and may our hearts be filled with faith and hope and the joy of the Resurrection. Risen Christ, you are always with us, even when we weep. Amen.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

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