



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Monday in Holy Week

[RCL] Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15; John 12:1-11

### The Way of the Cross

Today's Collect may have sounded familiar to you:

*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.*

This collect is appointed for use on Fridays in Morning Prayer. This weekly Friday remembrance of Jesus's pain and crucifixion contrasts sharply the dominant culture's take on Fridays. Popular radio personalities express great relief that "we've finally made it to the weekend!" School children eat cafeteria pizza to celebrate "fun Friday!" News stations feature favorite talking heads on "Friday Round-Ups."

But for those of us who follow the rhythm of the church year—the rhythm of the prayer book and the Daily Office—Friday has a different tenor. We remember that Jesus died on a Friday, and we ask that we, his followers, may also "walk in the way of the cross, and find it none other than the way of life and peace." What a mystery.

Of course, today isn't Friday, rather it is Monday of Holy Week... a week in which we ask the Holy Spirit to allow us to accompany Jesus on the *via dolorosa*, "the sorrowful way." His suffering and sacrifice—alongside humanity's rejection of goodness and our tendency toward cruelty and self-protection—are the focus for our reverence and the source of our praise this week. We experience anew the strangeness of worshipping the one who willingly went to be humiliated, bullied, and weakened to the point of death.

The tradition has long taught that our focus on Jesus' suffering can have a salutary effect on our own bodies and souls. Spiritual practices like praying the Stations of the Cross invite us to slow down and take in each step along the sorrowful way of this week. Perhaps praying with an image of a woman wiping Jesus' bloodied face with her veil (one of the Stations of the Cross) will open some deep memory in you of when another ministered to you with compassion and gentleness. Or maybe you will recognize in yourself that oh-so-human urge to stand far off in the face of another's suffering, as the disciples did when Jesus hung from the cross. How might the Spirit nudge you to bridge that gap, here and now, by connecting with a friend who is experiencing the isolation that shame and suffering generate? Or perhaps—most healing of

all—you might recognize that the cross you bear has been borne by our Lord, and you will find solace in trusting again in the promise of resurrection.

Today's texts begin to bring us, gently, toward Friday, when time will stand still, when darkness will cover the earth at noonday, when the life that was the light of all peoples (John 1:4) will be extinguished.

The Scriptures appointed for today prepare us to face that darkness. Perhaps on Friday—when the world goes dark and silent after our Lord's cry of dereliction: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—we will be able to hear still the distant echo of Isaiah's promise that we heard today. Hear Isaiah's promise again:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
    my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
    he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
    or make it heard in the street;  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
    and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
He will not grow faint or be crushed  
    until he has established justice in the earth;

I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
    a light to the nations,  
    to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
    from the prison those who sit in darkness.

See, the former things have come to pass,  
    and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth,  
    I tell you of them. (Isaiah 42)

This week, as with all Holy Weeks since the first Easter, we face toward the deep and true darkness Friday holds with a footnote of hope: "This isn't the end of the story..." The Father did not abandon Jesus forever, and will not abandon us. In Jesus, we see the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: God has gone down with those in darkness, in dungeons, to bring us all back to life.

But first, Jesus—and we—must walk "the way of the cross."

Today's Gospel scene tips us toward the hope that "we may find it none other than the way of life and peace."

Jesus, you'll remember from Sunday's lesson, has raised Lazarus from the dead, commanding his friends to "Unbind him, and let him go." This sign—a proof that with God "love is stronger than death" (Song of

Songs 8:6)—fills the religious authorities with tremendous fear. They fear that growing trust in Jesus among the people will provoke the Romans to come destroy the Jewish temple and people. So Caiaphus, the Great High Priest, has suggested that Jesus be the scapegoat. His death might satisfy the Romans' need to "make a point," and his sacrificial death would spare the Jewish people from destruction. So the chief priests put a bounty on Jesus' head, and he goes into hiding. Until he comes out...and goes to his friends' home, a "safe house," for a dinner. That's where today's gospel picks up.

The sisters have the presence of mind to offer hospitality, to experience with Jesus a moment of celebration. This is a great mystery and one worth pondering: how God can give us the grace, sometimes, even in the midst of legitimate fear, to give thanks, to celebrate. When we pour out all that we have—as Mary does with the oil—we participate in an eternal beauty that transcends the world's fear and ugliness.

Perhaps you've witnessed something like this in your own life: a person sick and near death offering another person a precious gift; a neighborhood wiped out by a storm coming together for a meal that becomes a feast; a Pride parade erupting in goofiness and joy despite threats.

Along the way of the cross, suffering doesn't go away. But, through God's grace, the way of the cross transforms suffering into life and peace.

How does this grace come to us? How can we open our hearts to receive it?

Think again about Mary and Martha. Imagine how their trust in the Father has grown through the experience of seeing their brother Lazarus raised. They could risk joy; they could trust the God of life and light, even in the darkness of threats and terror. They found refuge under the shadow of Abba's wings.

How priceless is your love, O God! \*  
your people take refuge under the shadow of your wings.  
They feast upon the abundance of your house; \*  
you give them drink from the river of your delights.  
For with you is the well of life, \*  
And in your light we see light. (Psalm 36)

The good news is exactly what the Collect promises: walking in the way of the cross we find none other than the way of life and peace. It is God's desire that all of us feast in the abundance of his house, drink from the river of his delights, and trust in the beauty that transcends our fear.

God is faithful. The light shines in the darkness—even in this darkest of weeks—and the darkness will not overcome it.

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