

March 25, 2018
Act Four, Sign Eight
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John 19:16b-22

[The Crucifixion of Jesus]

So they took Jesus; ¹⁷ and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. ¹⁸ There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. ¹⁹ Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." ²⁰ Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. ²¹ Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" ²² Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."

Golgotha is the fourth act of John's five-act Passion of Christ, the crucifixion of Jesus. If the gospel doesn't hold here, friends, it doesn't hold and we have gathered for nothing. Maybe not nothing. We do good work in this life together, but we preach a lie. When I was a little girl in a white Protestant, middle America church, the worship calendar flipped from Palm Sunday to Easter; Jesus went from being a king to being an angel as easily as we went from coloring palm branches one Sunday to dying eggs the next.

The Catholic kids across the street had Good Friday. They went to mass but not school and weren't allowed to play outside. We never thought to ask why. As grownups we know too well *why*. If all the world were palm-trees-and-Easter-baskets-certain, what need of Christ would there be? Good Fridays are why Jesus came. If the gospel holds there, it holds everywhere, where the world gets as mean and ugly and wrong and violent as it gets anywhere.

Imagine if we all wore our Good Friday selves on the outside like we wear our smiles. We bring our cleaned-up selves to church not because we are lying, but because we don't want to fall apart in public – partly so we don't bother others, partly because we don't want to be the nervous, crying heap we fear we might become if our Good Friday selves are given too much latitude. All of us walk around all the time, carrying hurts and griefs as carefully as eggs. Wayward children, abusive parents, shaky relationships; old hurts, old secrets, old lies; grief, shame, regret; fear, so much fear.

I was a child back when church was all kings and angels. But even then people were breaking, bleeding, and dying. Because I didn't know it didn't make it not so. To these, for these, terribly tender places in us, Jesus came, that they not overwhelm us, but also

that they not torture us like a hundred pinpricks a day for all the days of our lives – by Golgotha, by walking into and surrendering to the very heart of human darkness.

Can you see how Jesus goes where we most fear going in our own hearts and lives? the places and the parts of our minds and memories that poke and prick and pull at us? not just at our faith, but at our very sanity sometimes? our capacity to keep moving through time and space? If, IF ONLY, we could bring our most frightened, grieving, broken selves to the center of this story and focus fully on what Jesus wants to show us, I have the suspicion we would never again doubt that God is altogether good and loves us completely. Sad things would still be sad. But we'd never be afraid. And since we wouldn't be afraid, we'd hurt each other less.

This palm-branch-waving crowd, they loved him when they thought he was a winner, riding on a donkey like a king who had just won the city, knowing full well no battle had been fought. They love him, until they hate him. And they hate him, because our Good Fridays aren't always about our sorrow, right? They are also about our anger – and sometimes there's hardly a hair's difference between them – our capacity to take all the grief and hurt and fear and shame and regret inside ourselves, and hurl it at whatever target is closest, especially if we can find a bunch of other already angry people (mobs, people doing together what most will never do alone), sometimes for better – except then they aren't called mobs – so, mostly for worse. And now the mob has gotten what they screamed for: Jesus crucified; not dead; just nailed and lifted up.

Death by crucifixion took a long time, days in some cases. It was designed as torture only, and it left people horribly crippled, so they lived but were marked as *having been crucified*. Often vultures came before death. Jesus spent only hours on the cross, enough to know something of what people go through on this earth, I suppose. The guilty and the innocent.

Golgotha is Act 4 of John's five-act Passion Play. The urge to hurry up and flip the page simply makes us human. No one wants to sit with suffering, yet most people want to be sat with when our time comes – amen? To suffer is awful. To suffer alone is beyond the pale of God's will for humanity, it appears. So if we can stop on this page and take in what Jesus has done for us, no matter what brave faces we put on to be with each other when our hearts are breaking, we will discover that he knows, because he chose to know. He willingly walked where we would never have gone had we had a choice, or where we ended up when we were too stupid or too stubborn or too weak to do different.

I remember when my mama died and I was giant pregnant and that baby just kept turning and I knew she wanted out of me. And I thought, *Isn't it strange how when your heart is broken the world just keeps on turning, as if nothing at all has changed?* The world still has its business to attend to. Babies have to get born, no matter what; and that

is a blessing, no doubt. But friends, if the gospel doesn't hold when everything inside us says, ***this world is over and done for me!***, then the gospel cannot hold at all.

And if we don't stop and know Jesus with us at the very worst, the faith we claim on sunny days is frail and full of holes and has no business making promises it can never keep. John's writing is beautiful. In addition to his Five Acts of The Passion, he numbers Seven Signs of Jesus' Kingdom. Do you remember them?

I didn't preach them all, this time around:

- ❖ changing water into wine in chapter 2;
- ❖ healing the Roman soldier's son in chapter 4;
- ❖ healing a paralytic in chapter 5;
- ❖ feeding 5000 men, plus families, in chapter 6;
- ❖ walking on the water, also chapter 6;
- ❖ healing the man born blind in chapter 9; and
- ❖ raising Lazarus from the grave in chapter 11.

Then he adds an eighth sign that never gets included in the list. This one is hand-lettered, done up in three languages for all the world to read. A sign that says, *Jesus of Nazareth. King of the Jews*. It was Pilate's idea, John says. On the political surface of things, he was mocking the biblical people who drove him to it. They were furious, demanding that he change the sign. But that's the thing about the truth. It's the truth, no matter who tells it. Pilate was no hero. What he did, he did in fear and anger and revenge. But when he wrote and hung that sign, the truth was told all the same. Jesus was King, Messiah, the Ruler, the Savior, the Redeemer of the very people who rejected him. *The biblical people*, as we called them last week.

We know that following Act 5 of Jesus' Passion, many of them came 'round again and found themselves believers! In those same fickle people, the church first found our feet. Pilate wrote it in three languages, so that ALL people might read and know it. It hangs there still in every language read today, for every heart in the midst of breaking, for each and every one of us to decide as we pass by, to slow down enough to stop and look and take it in and know that we are not and never will be alone – in any sorrow this world, this life, might impose on us. God is with us in the darkness and the suffering and the fear. We are not and never shall be alone, in this world nor the next.

Would you pray with me?