



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT, APRIL 6, 2025
ISAIAH 43:16-21; PSALM 126; PHILIPPIANS 3:4b-14; JOHN 12:1-8

EVEN THE STONES CRY



Olive Tree in Garden of Gethsemane

John 12:1-8 [Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."]

This Fifth Sunday in Lent was, until a half century ago, known as Passion Sunday, a fortnight from Easter when we begin a two-week journey with Jesus, by the light of the

gibbous moon. We now collapse that into one week, holding next week's Palm Sunday as Passion Sunday, too, striking a cadence that will carry us breathless to the cross, before

leaning three days later by the opening of an empty tomb.

We no longer hear the Passion Gospel today, but we smell it foreshadowed in the perfumed air of Mary's act of anticipatory grief.

On the outskirts of Jerusalem, at a place called Bethany, Jesus enters a friend's home, with heart heavy in grief for the world's dark hunger, and Jesus hungry for companionship as he ponders the weight he wished would fall away.

The men around him were unsure or unaware, too busy shoring up their kingdoms of fear and self-preservation, frantically plotting a different course than the one Jesus knew lay ahead. But Mary knows what's really afoot, having already had her heart run the gauntlet of grief with her brother's death, and rising again. A heart brimful and broken, too. She knows the grief and hope of what lies ahead, and she loves Jesus into her courageous act of anointing his feet for the journey.

From Bethany, Jesus will make his way to the Mount of Olives, in a palm-laden parade of transient glory. Hope still lingers in the air.

If we were to follow this would-be king today, as our liturgical acts next Sunday will invite once more, his path would take us past the modern-day Princess Basma Rehab Hospital

for Palestinian children, a place of grief and hope run by the Episcopal Diocese in Jerusalem—grief, because many of the children are there to be treated for injuries sustained in the horrific war in Gaza; hope because the people who work there insist on this ministry making lives better. They press on amidst the weight of the world's worst impulses.

Jesus would have held all that grief and hope with us and with every generation—this is the paradox that is Passion Sunday, a timeless march that gathers us into the procession of Jesus' compassion for the whole of humanity, our hearts brimful and broken, too.

From there he, and we, descend into the Kidron Valley that separates the Mount of Olives from the Temple Mount, and an upper room a stone's throw from the Temple, where those first disciples would share their Last Supper with Jesus.

The descent into the valley is a winding path past graveyards and gardens, including a garden called Gethsemane where we are told Jesus went to pray. Gethsemane means an olive press once stood there, and the olive trees that still stand are ancient, contorted by age, pressed down by centuries of weathered existence, keepers of Jesus' prayer and all that have followed since.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams poetically captures this Christ-haunted landscape in his poem, *Gethsemane*,¹ which is in my pocket as I make the way this year to the cross and Easter—this year, when grief for the world’s dark hunger, and hope for humanity’s resilient goodness have my heart broken, and brimful, too.

Of the contorted ancient olive trees in Gethsemane, Rowan writes:

*Who said that trees grow easily
compared with us? What if the bright
bare load that pushes down on them
insisted that they spread and bowed
and pleated back on themselves and
cracked and hunched?*

Jesus went to the garden the night before he died to pray, bedraggled olive trees bearing witness when his bone-weary friends could not. Jesus’ prayer was simple, earnest, aggrieved: “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”

Abba, “the densest word,” Rowan says, “left to be collected by whoever happens to be passing,” including you and me in this moment. *Thy kingdom come, Father, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

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<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/apr/19/gethsemane-by-rowan-williams-saturday-poem>

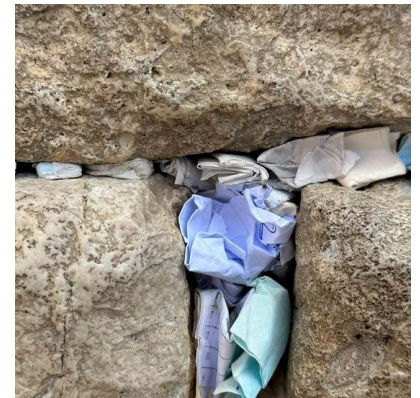
We need not make the journey physically to Gethsemane to follow Jesus on this fortnight excursion of prayerful dis-ease which is designed to gather up “the hopes and fears of all the years,” to use Phillips Brooks words.²

And we need not go alone. We, in community, can hold onto one another as we make our way through the graveyards and gardens of our lives.

And as the Stations of the Cross liturgy reminds us, recalling Isaiah’s words of solidarity, the Christ figure holds onto us also:

*Surely he has borne our griefs,
and carried our sorrows.*

Just a quarter-mile from Gethsemane is the Temple Mount, or what’s left of it, after imperial powers laid waste to the house of prayer that once stood as a beacon of hope on the hill. The Western Wall remains, aka the Wailing Wall, where millions have left their heartfelt prayers



Prayers in crevices of Western Wall

scribbled on scraps of paper and placed in the

² This phrase and a bit of exegetical content for this sermon are inspired by an essay by Christopher Yoder in [The Living Church](#), accessed April 3, 2025.

crevices between the massive stones—the stones, like the olive trees, holding the hopes and fears of all the years... Rowan says,

Across the valley are the other witnesses of two millennia, the broad stones...bristling with little messages to fill the cracks. As the light falls and flattens what grows on these hills, the fault lines dart and spread, there is room to say something, quick and tight.

The last time I was there in March 2023, my scribbled prayer was for peace in the world. That was one month after Russia invaded Ukraine; one month before the civil war in Sudan reignited; seven months before the war in Gaza.

Even the stones cry out with the weight of such prayers pressed in, quick and tight.

And yet, if Passion Sunday and this Lenten journey have anything to teach us still, it is that the trees and stones receive our heartfelt prayers, on either side of the valley of the shadow of death, and hold them with us and in solace with all others who would give voice to that densest word, Abba, even as we struggle to find our way to the empty tomb. Hope remains, because the empty tomb is near, friends, even as grief weighs heavy. We must remember this is the trajectory of our story, of God's story.

It is only by such light that we will find our way.

So let us journey together this fortnight of the full moon watch. Jesus has been everywhere we must go. Indeed, he has pushed his own prayer into crevices of trees and stones, left to be collected by us and any who pass by, hearts broken and brimful, too.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL