



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 3, 2026
ISAIAH 52:13-53:12; PSALM 22:1-30; HEBREWS 4:14-16; 5:7-9; MARK 14:1-15:47

BEHOLD THE WOOD OF THE CROSS

I have been a Christian for 65 years now. The longer I practice my faith, the more essential and all-encompassing Jesus's Passion becomes. Maybe it's because much of my priestly career has been spent being with suffering people. I find myself increasingly pulled in the direction of the cross, the *cruciform*— the cross-shaped, the cross-centered, the cross-infused dimensions of human life. I'm drawn to a God who suffers before he conquers or, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "only a suffering God can help us."ⁱ A bruised God who accompanies me as she saves me. I'm increasingly

reliant on the painful mystery that Good Friday proclaims, it is in dying that we will live. It is in surrendering that we might triumph. It is in the shape of a lonely, jagged cross that we'll find the healing of intimacy with God. That is, where we will find salvation.

A bit later in the service we will do something that we only do once a year as a community. We will contemplate or venerate the cross. I have always found this to be a powerful moment. Sure, I get to touch, embrace, bow to or kiss the cross but what I find most powerful is watching others do it. I see the gathered community assembled

before a huge cross as you kiss, hug, and venerate your own suffering and unjust suffering in the world. I watch as people with terminal illnesses bow to the reality of their impending death and little children reach out to touch the hard wood of the cross with their little hands. As I look at these babies, I wonder what suffering will befall their new and wonder-filled lives. So, in a few moments, I invite you to witness and stand in solidarity with your siblings in Christ as we all embrace the mystery of the cross.

We do this in a special way on Good Friday, but we also do it every time we gather for Christian prayer. In our tradition, there are moments in our services when some people make the sign of the cross over themselves. We embody and internalize this first century instrument of torture and state-sponsored execution, each time we cross ourselves. We invite the paradoxical cross of salvation into our minds, our hearts, and on our shoulders each time we make the sign of the cross.

The most powerful image of this embodiment of the cross came to me as I watched the movie Salvador almost 40 years ago. *Salvador* is the Spanish word for “Savior.” One scene from that movie is still seared into my mind 40 years after I saw it. Maybe it’s because the scene concerned someone that I knew personally.

Jean Donovan was one of the leaders of my church youth group in Cleveland in 1976. I was a freshman in high school and, though I felt a call to the priesthood, the idea of becoming a priest scared me to death and I ran away from it with great abandon. But Jean didn’t allow me to avoid it as she shared her passion for ministry, service, and caring for others. She spoke to us of God’s incredible love, especially for the outcast and marginalized. I was a gay teenager in the mid-seventies, and she was proclaiming God’s love for me, as I was. She was a management consultant with Arthur Andersen, but she found her true calling in the Diocesan Mission Project in El Salvador. The Cleveland Diocese staffed a parish in

La Libertad and Jean wanted to go there. She got training as a lay missionary and left our youth group in July 1977 to work at the Church of the Immaculate Conception in La Libertad, providing help to refugees of the Salvadoran Civil War, the poor, and the outcast. She provided shelter, food, transportation to medical appointments for the people, and she buried the bodies of the dead left behind by the death squads. The death squads were masked paramilitary groups who committed human rights abuses and extrajudicial killings against political opponents of the Salvadoran government and military. 75,000 people “disappeared” at their hands during the civil war.

In the weeks before her execution by those same death squads, Jean wrote this:

The Peace Corps left today and my heart sank low. The danger is extreme and they were right to leave. ... Now I must assess my own position, because I am not up for suicide. Several times I have decided to leave El Salvador. I almost could, except for the children,

*the poor, bruised victims of this insanity. Who would care for them? Whose heart could be so staunch as to favor the reasonable thing in a sea of their tears and loneliness? Not mine, dear friend, not mine.*ⁱⁱ

On December 2, 1980, Jean was driving a white van back from the airport in San Salvador. She and Ursuline sister, Dorothy Kazel, had just picked up Maryknoll sisters, Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, and they were returning to the parish when they were stopped by a death squad. The four women were violently removed from the van, savagely beaten, and sexually assaulted. In the movie the scene moved from that horror to Jean who was pulling herself together after the attack. She was sitting on the edge of a large pit that we all knew was about to become her grave. As she was fixing her hair and pulling up her blouse, a man with a rifle approached her. She looked at him with the most amazing gaze. Not a look of fear or resignation, but a glance of pure love and hope. And then she did this (*sign of the cross*).

The cross is God's response to the most profound evil and cruelty human sin can muster. In the face of horror, torture, and execution God gazes upon us in love and hope. On the cross, Jesus bears the violence, the contempt, the pain, and the humiliation of the entire world and absorbs it into his own body. He declares solidarity for all time with those who are abandoned, oppressed, imprisoned, beaten, disappeared, and murdered. He bursts open like a seed so that new life can grow and replenish the earth. He takes an instrument of torture and turns it into a bizarre vehicle of hospitality and communion for all people everywhere.

When we contemplate the cross by touching it, bowing to it, embracing, or kissing it, we embody the cruciform life in our own flesh. We embrace and venerate our suffering and that of the whole world. To place the cross on our

body as Jesus does is to stand, always, in the hot white center of the world's pain. Not just to glance in the general direction of suffering and then sidle away, but to dwell there. To identify ourselves completely with those who are aching, weeping, screaming, and dying. Taking up the cross means recognizing Christ crucified in every suffering soul and body that surrounds us. To me, this is the message of Good Friday. Our suffering God will not leave us alone. There is no death we will die, small or big, literal or figurative, that Jesus will not hold in his crucified arms. Here we are, and here is our suffering, sorrowing, and saving God. Here is the cross upon which we stand. "Behold the wood of the cross, on which is hung our salvation. Come, let us adore him."

ⁱ [Only the Suffering God Can Help – OpentheWord.org](http://OpentheWord.org)

ⁱⁱ [Jean Donovan - Wikipedia](http://JeanDonovan - Wikipedia)