



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
GOOD FRIDAY, YEAR B, APRIL 2, 2021  
ISAIAH 52: 13-53:12; PSALM 22: 1-30; HEBREWS 4:14-16; 5:7-9; JOHN 18:1-19:42

## A TERRIBLE BEAUTY

My ethics professor in seminary suggested that if we were really honest with ourselves we'd replace the crosses we hang around our necks with a needle and syringe, signifying the prevailing instrument of government-sanctioned capital punishment of our day. Rather than recycled nails strewn at the foot of the tree, we would find spent vials of barbiturates, benzodiazepines and potassium chloride on the tile floor of a prison's execution chamber.

If that is all a bit too descriptive for your taste, if you are uncomfortable with the images, I might suggest that is a good thing. A Good Friday thing, because we risk missing the point of this peculiar day if we quarantine the cross to a singular hill safely distanced from

us by two millennia of separation, or if we confine the cross to a masterpiece hanging in a museum salon's sterilized air, or if we constrain our cruciform understanding by masking it with unbridled delight in the glorious victory it holds for all humanity.

All those things are true about the cross—yes, Jesus died on one on a hill outside Jerusalem two thousand years ago; yes, centuries of Christian art have permeated our religious psyche; yes, we speak of the cross of glory...but today, we must face the brutal truth that there is more to this central symbol of our faith than just these. Good Friday is about plumbing the depths of the cruciform mystery by which we find paradoxical meaning in such a gruesome tool of torture.

The cross was the Roman Empire's instrument of fear and oppression on which criminals and rioters and those falsely accused would be strung up. Streets leading into each city were lined with crosses as symbols of imperial power meant to evoke fear and submission—reminders that you were not in control of your body or your life; others were. Crucifixions were spectacles, gathering hordes of onlookers, some horrified; others perversely entertained by the agonizing pain.

The nails were spikes really, thick and long enough to be reused over and over. Driving them into hands and feet was unnecessary and did not cause death—it was meant to inflict pain and to diminish one's resilience in the face of what was to come.

Death by crucifixion was a slow, grueling death by asphyxiation. Often legs were broken so they could not push up to expand their lungs. Hanging there, suffocating from the sagging weight of their own body, unable to fill the lungs with air—that was the terror designed to oppress the people. It was an instrument of shame long before it became the cross of glory, and we should not forget that. It was an instrument of power long before it held the hope of the powerless in Christ's crucified arms of loving embrace.

If that still seems a bit too historically distanced to prick at your spirit today, let me share this: I've been reading James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* this Lent. Cone, as you may know, was a longtime professor at Union Seminary in New York, a Black theologian and AME pastor who reflected a great deal on the nature of the cross and its American analog—the lynching tree on which thousands of Black people were hung, bloodied, asphyxiated, often burned while hoards gathered around for the spectacle. The lynching tree was an instrument of shame and fear and power and control, much as the cross was, and the fact that nooses continue to show up on trees or a Black family's front yard or a professor's office door in this country today should give us pause to consider how much closer the brutal truth of such crucifying violence strikes than first glance might suggest.

In an interview with Bill Moyers several years ago, Cone was asked why this is not common knowledge to most white Christians in America—this close connection between Roman crosses and American lynching trees. Cone said because it's ugly, and we don't like

to talk about stuff that's deep and ugly.”<sup>1</sup> He speaks of the terrible beauty there, if we are willing to go deep, to the place where we can get over any illusion of our innocence while also paradoxically realizing we've been freed by a crucified Christ to transcend the impulse to violence and lean into the arc of God's healing justice.

This is not for the faint of heart, folks—not because we should tremble as we turn to face a God who loves us, sinners that we are, but because God loves us enough to be found where suffering is, which means that to turn and face God necessarily and paradoxically requires that we look headlong into the face of those who suffer.

Lest we think we can crane our necks around the corner and catch a glimpse of the empty tomb just yet, we are stopped cold today, here and now, by the cross and the contorted limbs of Christ hanging there, limp in their lifeless exhaustion. Period. We can go no further. Not yet.

For us today, the clock has stopped, the clouds have gathered in their dark and somber declaration, the nails have been driven, the flesh has been torn, the blood has been spilled, the cock has crowed, the Christ

has cried and breathed his last, and we are invited to see it all for its terrible beauty. To live it all.

No day is more full of the tense contractures of life than Good Friday. The very name is provocative—the day on which death tears at our hearts, is called *Good*. The day on which little good can be gleaned. Paradox, cruel irony, enough to cajole us from any normative sense that things are as they should be.

The whole affair is a mockery of justice; a mocking of Jesus, the innocent one, whose only crime was that he was so attuned to God's love that he looked on the face of those suffering in his midst, and chose to tend to them with compassion. It was a radical threat to the power structure. It got him killed.

But in the ultimate paradox of the Paschal Mystery, that Jesus' death informs his resurrection, and his resurrection informs his death, we are reminded of the fact that God entered our humanity fully, even unto death, so that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death this day, we have hope—hope that all is not lost...that God is up to something good. Good.

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<https://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/11232007/transcript1.html>

Perhaps you'll have to come closer to the cross to see the terrible beauty of it all.

