SERMONS FOR Holy Week 2018

An offering of The Episcopal Church’s Sermons That Work
Holy Week 2018

DEAR READER,

Thank you for downloading Sermons for Holy Week, a collection of materials prepared by some of the best preachers from across the Episcopal Church.

For more than twenty years, Sermons That Work has existed to provide Episcopalians and others with sermons, Bible studies, and bulletin inserts that speak to congregations across the Church. Our writers and readers come from numerous and varied backgrounds, and the resources we provide are used in small house churches, sprawling cathedrals, and everything in-between.

It is a special thing indeed to present this collection of sermons in a new way, compiled into a single document for devotional reading through this week. I hope that as you read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the appointed scripture and the sermon for the day, that you will find your faith strengthened. I hope you will be reminded that, as we journey from Palm Sunday through the darkness of the days that follow, that evil, death, betrayal, and cruelty never have the final word—that, while the pain of this week is excruciatingly real, the Easter light on the other side is just as real; that the Man of Sorrows we encounter throughout this week is, even now, the one at whose name, “every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, [and] every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11).

On behalf of Sermons That Work and the Episcopal Church’s Office of Communication, I wish you a blessed Holy Week and a joyous Easter. Alleluia, Christ is risen!

Your brother in Christ,

Christopher Sikkema
The Episcopal Church
The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

READINGS
ISAIAH 50:4-9A  PSALM 31:9-16  PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

COLLECT
Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for the human race you sent your Son our Savior Jesus Christ to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

SACRIFICE
by the Rev. Jason Cox

How did this happen? How did Jesus’ life of peace end in such a violent death? We stand at the edge of this moment, looking on in horror and confusion — just as Jesus’ followers did on the day he was crucified. The violence we have seen is numbing: it robs us of the ability to think clearly. Like Peter in Pilate’s courtyard, we are afraid. And fear will always lead us astray. So it’s a difficult moment to try and puzzle out the meaning of what happened here.

The familiar formula — that Jesus died for our sins — raises more questions than it answers. First, exactly how is Jesus’ death connected with our forgiveness? Why does this terrible thing lead to that wonderful thing? And who is it that wants this sacrifice anyway?

Some are content to say that God does. But surely God cannot need such a sacrifice. Consider what the prophets have to say about the offerings and sacrifices made in the temple. In Isaiah, God says, “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings… I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.” And in Hosea: “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” And on Ash Wednesday, we began Lent by reciting this line from Psalm 51: “The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”
Throughout his ministry, Jesus questioned the authority the temple claimed as the sole arbiter of God’s grace. Every time he broke one of the rules by healing on the Sabbath or eating with someone considered unclean, he was saying that God’s love embraces everyone. No one controls access to God’s grace. God’s love is bigger than you think it is.

But if God did not desire Jesus’ death in this way, then who did? Why did this happen?

To answer that question, we have to fill in some of the story that’s missing from the Palm Sunday liturgy. We began this morning by waving our palm branches in the air, celebrating Jesus’ “Triumphal Entry” into Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples have come from the countryside, where his ministry began, to celebrate Passover in the ancient city. Jesus knew the crowds would be there — he wanted to bring his message to as many people as possible, and to confront the religious authorities in the temple head on.

Mark’s timeline for the whole week of Passover is surprisingly precise. Because of this, we can work out that Jesus would have entered Jerusalem on the Sunday before Passover. The Palm Sunday liturgy then skips over several days of that Passover week, and several chapters of Mark’s Gospel, and the next thing we know, it is Thursday evening. Jesus’ disciples are preparing the Passover meal, as Mark says, “on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed.” But it’s what happens between Sunday and Thursday that helps explain why the authorities — both Jewish and Roman — were so keen to have Jesus killed.

Let’s fill in some of the missing pieces. First of all, Jesus’ so-called triumphal entry: although the crowds shouted Hosanna to greet him, it seems perfectly obvious that Jesus’ procession was anything but triumphant. He chose to ride into town on a young colt, the foal of a donkey. If this is hard for you to picture, imagine a large and friendly dog, about three feet tall at the shoulder. Jesus has no armor but the cloaks of peasants, and he is lauded with palm branches and leaves instead of golden eagles on spears carried in procession by Roman soldiers.

You see, it was Rome that really loved a procession. Rome excelled at using a military parade as a demonstration of its dominance, to keep its subjugated peasants in awe. And Jesus knew that Pilate, the Roman Governor, made a point of riding from his capital city on the Mediterranean coast every Passover, to make sure these crowds of peasants in Jerusalem stayed in line. Picture Pilate on a magnificent war horse and surrounded by a legion of Roman soldiers in red and gold armor, marching in lockstep as they enter the city gates.
Jesus’ little street parade, in contrast, with the donkey and the palm fronds, is an anti-imperial protest. He’s mocking the empty pomp of the empire, questioning the brutality with which Rome ruled the peasant class and kept Judea impoverished.

After taking on the empire, Jesus goes straight to the temple. The day after that peace demonstration, Jesus takes over the temple courtyard, the heart of the action during Passover week, and stages a teach-in. Remember Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers? Well, that’s what he did on the Monday before Passover. He tells thinly veiled parables about the religious leaders which cast them in a very bad light. This goes on for several days.

By the time Wednesday has come around, Jesus denounces them openly: “Beware of the scribes,” he says, “who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces... They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearances say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

They devour widows’ houses: that is Jesus’ accusation against the religious authorities. They think they control access to God’s grace by controlling the temple. The only way to get a little of that grace was to pay up: all those money changers were there to facilitate your purchase of the correct sacrificial animal, which, for the right price, the priests would offer to God on your behalf. The price was the same whether you were a poor widow or a rich merchant.

From the start of his ministry, Jesus’ central message has been, “The Kingdom of God is at hand!” And that is a dangerous message, for it challenges both the secular and the religious authorities. If God is King over all, then Caesar is not. And in Jesus’ vision of God’s Kingdom, God’s love is not mediated by priests at the temple but is free and available to all. Is it any wonder that both the Jewish and the Roman leaders wanted Jesus dead?

Nailing him to a cross was supposed to be the final solution. Get rid of the rabble-rouser, silence him, and his message would die with him. Crucifixion was the world’s way of saying no to everything Jesus stood for.

The world says no to Jesus — but God says yes. This is the good news that Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost: “God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.” It’s the first attempt at explaining what happened on Good Friday. The world rejects Jesus’ message and tries to silence him in death — but God vindicates Jesus and raises him to life. The horror and violence we inflict on an innocent man shows the depth of human evil and the ultimate defeat of human power, by revealing the moral bankruptcy
of human beings left to our own devices. But God’s love as revealed in Jesus is life itself: Love that can never be silenced, never be killed. Love that will restore our lost humanity.

Out of this terrible violence, God has made an opening between heaven and earth. At the very end of the Passion narrative, at the moment of Jesus’ death, Mark tells us that “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.” This is the veil in the temple that separated the people from the power and love of God — the veil that contained God’s presence, and behind which only the high priest was allowed to go.

This veil was torn asunder, and God’s love is no longer contained in a temple. Jesus’ redeeming work was to confront those who tried to keep God locked up. Jesus’ life and teaching have shown us a new way. The scandal of the cross is that now, God’s love can go anywhere and reach anyone. Even those who are different from us. Even those who don’t deserve it. Even those who don’t believe. God’s love now permeates the whole universe and continually pulls us from death into life, with each breath we take, from the beginning of time until the end.

Amen.

The Rev. Jason Cox has served as associate rector at St. Columba’s Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., since 2011. Prior to working at St. Columba’s, he directed the Episcopal Urban Intern Program (part of Episcopal Service Corps), a year-long service and discernment program for young adults, in the Diocese of Los Angeles. Before ordination, he served as an intern in the Episcopal Urban Intern Program, working with homeless clients in a transitional housing facility on L.A.’s skid row.
Monday in Holy Week

**COLLECT**
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.

**LEAVE HER ALONE. SHE IS TELLING THE TRUTH.**
by the Rev. Dr. Ada Wong Nagata

In our Episcopal tradition, it was Palm Sunday yesterday. Jesus has entered Jerusalem. We are beginning Holy Week, and Jesus is walking closer and closer toward the cross.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is at Bethany, attending a dinner party hosted by Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead a few days earlier. This must be a big party to celebrate the miracle. Jesus must be treated like a king.

As usual, Lazarus’ sister Martha is busy cooking dinner and serving the guests. Mary does something unlike her sister. Last time when they were hosting, Mary was sitting by Jesus’ feet, listening to his teaching instead of helping Martha. That made Martha mad and she complained to Jesus. This time, Mary disappeared and then came back with “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” (John 12:3). This time, it is not Martha who complains, but Jesus’ disciple, Judas. He complains that Mary is wasting the perfume, which could have been used for the poor.

Usually, an anointing would be on the head, but Mary anointed the feet of Jesus. If she anointed his head, that might really look like she was treating him like a king, since he raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. However, she anoints his feet! She then wipes his feet with her hair. What an unusual thing Mary has done!
The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, a well-known preacher and Episcopal priest, says what Mary has done is a prophetic act. Mary is foretelling Jesus’ death and his washing of the disciples’ feet.

When feet are anointed, it usually happens when the person is dead. Jesus has been telling his disciples that he will suffer and die soon, but the disciples have been in denial. Jesus scolded Peter, even calling him “Satan,” because he cared only for earthly and not heavenly things. Mary believes in Jesus and accepts his upcoming death. Mary does this to affirm the message that Jesus has been delivering. If you have been to a funeral home, you will notice it is often filled with the fragrance of flowers. This house must smell like that, a sign of Jesus’ upcoming death.

In a few days, Jesus will have his last supper. Before the supper, he will wash his disciples’ feet. This foot washing is the prelude of Jesus’ new commandment to them, that they love one another as he has loved them. Mary is carrying out what Jesus will teach his disciples by washing his feet with perfume and her precious hair. She is both prophesying and being a good disciple, loving Jesus as he has loved her, and her brother, Lazarus, and her sister, Martha.

Mary is doing strange things, and so is Jesus. Jesus has been advocating for the poor and the oppressed. However, when Judas complains about the wasting of the expensive perfume, which could have been sold to benefit the poor, Jesus tells him to leave Mary alone. According to some scholars, three hundred denarii would have been about a year’s wages for a regular worker in Jesus’ time. That certainly is a lot of money. The Gospel tells us that Judas is a thief and will eventually betray Jesus, and he may not be sincerely concerned about helping the poor, but he does have a point; there are a lot of poor people around who need help—why not sell the perfume to help them instead of spending it on one person?

However, who is this one person? This person is Jesus, the Son of God, the Christ.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, the author describes the Christ as one who has entered the Holy Place to obtain eternal redemption, and who comes with his own blood through the eternal Spirit to purify “our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!” (Hebrews 9:12-14). That is what Jesus does. Jesus the Christ sheds his human blood on the cross but also sheds his metaphorical blood through the Holy Spirit to purify our conscience and to offer eternal redemption. Jesus’ human death leads to his resurrection—and our resurrection.
On Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, we are invited “to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.” “And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature,” we are reminded of our mortality by the ashes imposed on our foreheads (Book of Common Prayer, p. 265).

We have been walking on this spiritual Lenten journey for more than five weeks and are now on the last leg. During this journey, we have been reminded of the temptation of Jesus, the foretelling of his passion, the cleansing of the temple as a house of worship, and the fact that a grain has to die to bear fruit. These messages all point to his upcoming death. The most important lesson is that God loves God’s people, and Jesus becomes incarnate to redeem God’s people, and Jesus’ death will lead to his resurrection. If we follow the way of Jesus, we will have our conscience purified by the metaphorical blood of Jesus and lead to new life and eternal redemption.

That’s why Jesus stops Judas from complaining about Mary’s actions: so that she can continue the message of his upcoming death—an important message. His death is to carry out his mission on earth, so as to purify our conscience, so as to lead us to redemption. Three hundred denarii may be a lot of money, and helping the poor is important, and in a way, we do need money to help them. However, what is the meaning of doing so? Doing it for the glory of being charitable, as dead work? Or for the sake of loving God and loving God’s people? To love God and to love God’s people is the reason for Jesus’ death and leads to resurrection. What is three hundred denarii compared to Jesus’ life?

Remember, we all face death once in baptism: “In [the water of Baptism] we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit” (BCP, p. 306). We have died with Jesus and accepted new life. Have we been carrying our own cross and following Jesus, so as to love others as God has loved us? Have we been living the way of life that Jesus wants us to live?

The Rev. Dr. Ada Wong Nagata is Priest in Charge and Director of Ah Foo Jubilee Community Center at Church of Our Savior, Manhattan, a bilingual, English and Cantonese church in Chinatown. She is a board member of Li Tim-Oi Center, an Asian Ministry Center of the Episcopal Church based in the Diocese of Los Angeles, and Honorary Canon of the Cathedral Center of St. Paul, Diocese of Los Angeles. Ada earned her Doctor of Ministry from Episcopal Divinity School in 2015. She served as Convener of the Chinese Convocation of Episcopal Asiamerican Ministries (EAM) from 2009-2016. Ada loves hiking and meditative walk.
Tuesday in Holy Week

READINGS
ISAIAH 49:1-7          PSALM 71:1-14          1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31
JOHN 12:20-36

COLLECT
O God, by the passion of your blessed Son you made an instrument of shameful death to be for us the means of life: Grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ, that we may gladly suffer shame and loss for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

LET GO INTO JESUS
by the Rev. Whitney Rice

Being there for one another in times of trouble is harder than it appears on the surface. We often define a friend as someone who will be there for us when we need them, but what does that really mean?

Our first instinct when something terrible is happening is to turn away, to run and escape, to get out before the terrible thing can suck us in as well. Car accident, cancer diagnosis, job loss, lingering battle with grief—we shy away as if they were contagious.

If we make the decision that we’re not going to run away but instead stay with our friend who is suffering, our next instinct is to try and fix it, to say, “No, look, do this, change this, fix this and you’ll be fine.” It takes a very disciplined and patient sort of love to truly be there for someone in crisis without trying to fix it, an art that many of us sometimes despair of ever mastering.

It is exactly that sort of love that we can often look back on and recognize in God’s response to our own dark moments. God doesn’t abandon us, but neither does God very often step in and fix us or our circumstances. God stands with us with the bravest and strongest love of all, the love that undergoes suffering with us rather than sparing us or Godself.
Holy Week is the test of whether we can summon that sort of love within ourselves for Jesus. The Greek visitors to Jerusalem for the Passover in our Gospel today say something that has the potential to convict us in our relationship with Jesus.

They come to Philip, one of the disciples, and say to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” We have to ask ourselves, is that statement true of us? Do we wish to see Jesus? Do we really wish to see him completely, in his fullness, in his moments of glory and his moments of pain?

Each of us will find one aspect or another of Jesus difficult to want to see. Some of us find ourselves drawn to Jesus most in his times of humanness and trial. We love him most when we see him summon his courage in his moments of human vulnerability. Others find themselves drawn to Jesus in his moments of glory and power. They love the heavenly Christ, the cosmic Word who undergirds creation and subdues the raging waters and scatters miracles from his fingertips. Jesus is all of these things. He is fully human and fully divine.

We see both sides of his nature in this very Gospel story. You can find which part of Jesus you relate to and which part seems foreign to you by how you react to his words in different parts of this text. When do you love Jesus more? When he says, “Now my soul is troubled”? Then you’re probably in closer relationship to the human side of Jesus. Or do you find yourself thrilling when he says, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified”? Then you’re probably in closer relationship to the divine side of Jesus.

There’s absolutely nothing wrong with finding yourself touched and moved to see Jesus as a man or Christ as God, one more than the other. But it is important for us to reach for understanding and encounter with the opposite side of Jesus, the part we don’t understand and identify with as much. And that is because we want the words of the Greeks in Jerusalem to be true of us. We want to be able to say, “We wish to see Jesus,” Jesus in his fullness, Jesus in his complexity, Jesus as all he came to us to be and do.

What can the parts of Jesus we neglect teach us about the parts of ourselves we neglect? Are we comfortable with our own power? Are we comfortable with our own weakness? Which do we run from when we see them in ourselves? Which do we run from when we see them in each other?
It is a lifelong quest of spiritual growth to step into our fears rather than running away from them, to step into what we perceive as darkness that should be hidden away and find it the very path to resurrection and new life. If we can learn to embrace the wholeness of Jesus, the parts of him that we understand and identify with, and the parts that seem mysterious and foreign, we are one step closer to embracing the sun and the shadow within ourselves and each other. We are one step closer to seeing that humility and glory each have their place and their value.

There is something about approaching this precipice with Jesus during Holy Week, entering these days with him that are literally a life and death situation, that should make us want to abandon all our complex plans for ourselves and our churches and our loved ones. As Jesus’ allies and earthly power are stripped away from him and he bears it with such grace—more than that, he uses the lessening of these extraneous things to drive him to the center of his purpose on Earth—it leads us to repent of our attempts to control people and events around us. It leads us to let ourselves be willingly stripped of the illusion of power and control. We long to be reduced to the simple and heartfelt and honest desire in the Gospel, “I wish to see Jesus.”

For what is Holy Week but Jesus letting go of all control of his life and his power? We know he could have swept away all resistance to his rule, saved himself from trial and execution without breaking a sweat. But he let go. He abandoned himself, not to hopelessness and death, but to hope and faith. He let go and believed that his love for us was worth sacrificing everything, and the love of his Father would call him back to life on the third day.

Can we approach these final days with Jesus that lead us to such a terrifying and painful place with the same faith that he displays? Can we really be there for him with the faithfulness that a true friend shows in time of crisis, the ability to be present through suffering without trying to fix it? Do we really want to see Jesus as he is in all his glory and all his pain?

The answers to those questions will be the answer to a deeper quandary, whether we’re ready to submit ourselves to death and resurrection, our full selves, the spectrum of our strength and weakness, to the cleansing and purifying fire of Calvary.

Can we let go of our plans, our defenses, our precious control, and go to the Cross with naked honesty, nothing hidden and nothing denied?
It becomes clear that we cannot force honesty or courage on ourselves. We cannot force ourselves to be faithful to Jesus or to ourselves or our friends.

We have to follow Jesus’ example and let go. Let go into what? Into the one whose every human cell and every divine power was filled with one compelling purpose, to love us. Let go into our beloved Jesus.

Amen.

The Rev. Whitney Rice is an Episcopal priest in the Diocese of Indianapolis and currently the Associate Rector the St. Francis-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church in Zionsville, Indiana. A native of Lee’s Summit, Missouri, she comes to ordained ministry by way of the University of Kansas and Yale Divinity School, where she won the Yale University Charles S. Mersick Prize for Public Address and Preaching and the Yale University E. William Muehl Award for Excellence in Preaching. See more of her work at www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com.
COLLECT
Lord God, whose blessed Son our Savior gave his body to be whipped and his face to be spit upon: Give us grace to accept joyfully the sufferings of the present time, confident of the glory that shall be revealed; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

READINGS
ISAIAH 50:4-9A          PSALM 70          HEBREWS 12:1-3
JOHN 13:21-32

Suffering is not something we do well, generally speaking. Suffering is not something we seek out, not something we cultivate, not something we practice so we can do it even better.

No, suffering is something we avoid – or try to avoid – as best we can.

And, when you come right down to it, suffering is not something we experience that much or that deeply in our privileged lives in twenty-first-century America.

O, there are exceptions, to be sure. But for most of us, what we consider “suffering” are things like being stuck in a traffic jam, or having to wait a long time for food to be served to us in a restaurant, or not finding a free locker at the gym – things that the world’s poor and underprivileged would find very curious indeed.

Their idea of suffering could be more like this: being stuck in an unending cycle of poverty and oppression, having to wait a long time for any food at all, or not finding a day free from back-breaking labor.

Now, that’s suffering.

So, how very strange would it be to deliberately, intentionally, and willfully submit ourselves to suffering?
How very odd to admit that one of our closest friends or associates will betray us — and not just allow that to happen, but actually encourage it?

And how very outlandish to say — once that betrayal has been put in action, when that suffering inevitably lies ahead — how very outlandish to say, “Now I have been glorified, and God has been glorified in me.”

And yet this is exactly what Jesus does and says, as told to us in this passage from the Gospel according to John.

The sequence goes something like this:

“One of you will betray me,” Jesus says.

Then “Do quickly what you are going to do.”

Followed by, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.”

First, it seems odd that Jesus seems to welcome the betrayal.

Yet elsewhere he is quoted as saying, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed,” (Mt. 17:22) and “the Son of Man is going as it has been determined” (Lk. 22:22).

Perhaps he simply accepts as inevitable that he will indeed suffer. He’s not exactly enamored of the idea, but he knows in his heart that he cannot avoid his fate.

Then he seems to want to have it over with quickly — a feeling with which any of us could resonate.

If there’s going to be pain, at least make it short. If we must endure agony, don’t let it be for a long time. If there are hard times ahead, please let them be brief.

Then comes the most surprising statement of all, the one about his being glorified, and God being glorified in him.

And, in a way, that’s exactly where we stand on this Wednesday in Holy Week.

We are in the lull between Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem – with palms before him and death ahead of him.

The betrayal is inevitable; in the narrative, it happens tomorrow.
And then the agony in Gethsemane, the trial, the condemnation before Pilate, the carrying of the cross, a crown of thorns, the nailing to the cross, and the crucifixion itself – those three hours of torment in the midday sun.

The suffering will be severe – but brief. The whole cycle begins tomorrow night, and it ends on Friday afternoon.

And then there’s the glory, something we must yet wait for, something we nevertheless seek, something we hope will happen again – and happen anew – this Easter morning.

Is there a message for us in all this? – something more than a lecture in history or a narration of past events?

Well, if suffering is inevitable for the God-made-human we call Jesus, perhaps too it is inevitable for us.

That’s not exactly good news, but it is truth-telling. And our suffering is likely to pale compared with his. Perhaps there’s a word of comfort in that.

And, like Jesus, we hope that our suffering will be brief. With him, we say, “Let’s just get this over with!”

Because after that suffering, at the end of that time of trial, when the dark clouds clear: then the glory of God is revealed.

We are here in the middle of Holy Week, in the tension of a kind of metaphor for life itself:

Amidst the struggle, facing the pain, between the beginning and the end — and awaiting not just the yearly commemoration of the first Easter, but also the final event in the divine plan, something yet to come.

And so, we prepare to move ourselves away from the ashes, that we may be able to greet the Easter dawn.

We move away from sin, and into the new life promised for each of us.

We move away from suffering and betrayal, and into an eternal life of ineffable joys.

We move away even from our old selves, and into a new existence that is more and more in the image of God.
This is our journey – not simply commemorating past events, as miraculous as they were.

But anticipating miracles yet to come.

And appropriating that past into our present, making it come alive for us, as it came alive for Jesus – as a foretaste of the final moment when we are reunited with those who have gone before.

For we know that, even as the horrors of Good Friday lie ahead, we will once again say, “Welcome, Happy Easter” at the end of this week, because we are in the midst of the week when wickedness is put to flight, and sin is washed away.

This week that restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to those who mourn.

This week that casts out pride and hatred, and brings peace and concord.

At the end of this week we get a glimpse of the day of the general resurrection, when we, with all those who are of the mystical body, will be set on God’s right hand, and hear that most joyful voice: “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

The Rev. Barrie Bates has served Anglican and Lutheran congregations in California, New York, and New Jersey over the past 20+ years. He holds a Ph.D. in liturgical studies, and memberships in the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, the Sons of the American Revolution, and the Screen Actors’ Guild. Other than ordained ministry, his interests include opera, fine dining, and boating.
COLLECT
Almighty Father, whose dear Son, on the night before he suffered, instituted the Sacrament of his Body and Blood: Mercifully grant that we may receive it thankfully in remembrance of Jesus Christ our Lord, who in these holy mysteries gives us a pledge of eternal life; and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

TO THE END
by the Rev. Anna Tew

“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

Jesus’ time is running short.

We are not strangers to the idea of a person’s last days of life.

Because we know that we will all die, we often find ways to think about both our own last days and the last days of those we love. We make movies about it – both funny movies and heart-wrenching ones. Sometimes, we sit at the bedsides of our loved ones as they slip away slowly. Other times, we are called to the emergency room in the middle of the night. But last days – and death – always find us eventually. That is why we understand the importance of a person’s last days on earth, and that is why Maundy Thursday can hit us in such interesting ways.

Because you see, we live in a world filled with death. We have all lost loved ones. Often, the memories that stick out most in our minds are things that happened right before the person died, whether they were taken from us suddenly or slowly. Sure, we also remember things besides their last days: we remember eating together, laughing together, intimate conversations, and things like that. We also remember, perhaps most clearly, things that happened right before they died.
Now Jesus, knowing that he is about to die, gathers his closest friends for a meal. These are some of the last memories his disciples will have of him before the crucifixion. Though they will remember other things about Jesus—traveling, laughing, and talking with him—they will remember these moments, perhaps, most strongly. What he says and does here will echo for them throughout their lives as they begin to build the Church we know today.

“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

Jesus’ time is running short.

Yes, he will be resurrected, but Holy Week calls us to imagine ourselves in the places of the disciples, imagining for once that we do not know the ending. If death is not a reality, after all, Easter is no miracle, and Jesus is about to be put to death. Jesus’ time is running short.

What would you do if you knew that you were about to die?

What memories would you want to create, for yourself and your loved ones?

What would you do if you had not weeks or months, but mere hours before your death?

“Because he loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

It’s likely that most of us would try to be like Jesus in his last days before he was crucified. In our last week of life, most of us would be most concerned not with our “bucket lists,” but with our loved ones.

What would you do for those you love?

What would you want them to know, and how would you communicate those things?

Jesus’ time is running short, and the Gospel passage from John tells the story of his last night with them before he dies. It’s interesting to see how the Son of God chooses to spend his last hours before his death with those that he loves. What does he do? He shares a meal with them, he gives them some last instructions, and he gets up from the dinner table, lays aside his outer robe, and washes his disciples’ feet.

Jesus does exactly what many of us would do if we knew that we were spending our last few hours with our loved ones before our death. We would tell them things, yes. We might share a meal with them, like Jesus did. Perhaps above anything, we would touch them one last time.
We often forget how important our bodies are in our experience as human beings. We talk a lot about body and soul as if they are completely separate things in the world. When we consider our own loved ones, however, it’s likely that their personalities are hardly separate in our minds from their faces, the way they walk, the hand gestures they use so frequently, the way that they hug us, or even the way they smell.

In the last few hours before his death, Jesus spends his time eating and drinking with his disciples and washing their feet, impressing into their minds and their bodies the memory of him in an act of love.

Contrary to the typical Sunday school understanding of this story, the foot washing is not primarily about service. That’s part of it, but it’s only part of a much bigger picture. This becomes clear if you read the passages around this text. “He loved them to the end.” “Love another as I have loved you.” The foot washing is about Jesus’ love and his willingness to show that love, even if it means the vulnerability of washing his disciples’ dirty feet. Even if it means an arrest and a trial before Pilate. Even if it means death by execution on a Roman cross. The foot washing is the acting out of the Great Commandment that we hear today: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Though caring for a sick loved one or making dinner for a friend may be an act of service, we most commonly describe such acts as acts of love. So it is with the foot washing.

We can only imagine what the disciples felt. Humbled? Shocked? Awkward?

Peter speaks up: “Are you going to wash my feet? You will never wash my feet.”

We hear Peter’s objection, and it sounds a lot like most of ours would have been. He knows who Jesus is, and there’s no way that the Word of God made flesh is going to wash his feet.

Jesus doesn’t argue. He asks nothing of Peter or the other disciples but that they place themselves fully into his hands and trust that he knows what he’s doing. He tells Peter, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Peter has no idea what Jesus is doing, but Jesus isn’t interested in telling Peter why he’s washing his feet. He’s just asking for Peter to trust him, to be vulnerable.

This is not just how foot washing works. This is often how God works, too.
We don’t always know what God is doing. God only asks us to trust, to be vulnerable, to believe that God loves us fiercely, and to receive God’s love – mind, heart, soul, and body.

What moments will the people in our lives remember when we are gone? What moments will we remember of those who die before us? Truly, we are all imperfect, and we can all sometimes be hard to live with, yet constantly, we are blessed to see, laugh with, touch, and embrace people who love us. Maybe you experience this with your significant other, maybe with your kids and grandkids, maybe with your friends or other loved ones or with your church family. Cherish these moments – it is God’s grace given through people. It is sacramental, and it is holy.

That is what we will remember of each other when we no longer walk the earth together. That is what we will have to cherish until we see one another again on the other side, when we share this feast with Christ in his kingdom with all the saints. We love one another, though imperfectly, because Christ first loved us.

Yes, time is running short for Jesus tonight. But we live in a world full of death.

Time is running short for all of us.

“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

As time runs short for Jesus, may we experience the story as if for the first time, forgetting that we know the ending. Because this isn’t just the story of Jesus. This is the story of our Savior, the Word of God made flesh for us. This is our story; it is the story that tells us who we are, and why we are to love one another.

We are who we are because he loved his own who were in the world, and he loved us – fiercely – to the end. Amen.

The Rev. Anna Tew is a Lutheran pastor serving Our Savior’s Lutheran Church (ELCA) in South Hadley, Massachusetts. A product of several places, she was born in rural Alabama, considers Atlanta home, and lives in and adores New England. She has worked in a variety of ministry settings, urban and rural, both in the parish and in hospital chaplaincy. In her spare time, Anna enjoys climbing the nearby mountains, traveling, exploring cities and nightlife, and keeping up with politics.
Good Friday

READINGS
ISAIAH 52:13-53:12          PSALM 22          HEBREWS 10:16-25 or
HEBREWS 4:14-16; 5:7-9      JOHN 18:1-19:42

COLLECT
Almighty God, we pray you graciously to behold this your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

THE PASSION ACCORDING TO JOHN
by Susan Butterworth

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Today we have heard some of the most beautiful, painful, heart-wrenching passages of scripture, juxtaposed with one of the holiest, most beautiful, painful, heart-wrenching moments of the Christian story. Jesus, our beloved healer, lover of souls, champion of the poor, weak, and oppressed, the man who washed the feet of his friends, has been betrayed by one of those same friends. He has been misunderstood and accused by the leaders of his own people. He has heard the shouts of “Crucify him! Crucify him!” when the crowd had the chance to set him free. Maybe some of those people had been among the crowds listening to Jesus preach, and been changed by the encounter. Even Peter denies that he knows him. Three times! How complicated and interwoven are those who love him and those who condemn him!

The suffering servant passage from Isaiah, which we heard today, describes a humble, indigenous servant who was both astonishing and rejected by those around him and “by a perversion of justice...taken away.” This sounds to us Christians like the tragedy of Jesus’ betrayal, suffering, and death. For some Christians, this passage is understood as an explicit prophecy of Christ’s suffering and death. For them, Isaiah 53 is an important proof-text that Christianity was predicted by the Hebrew prophet centuries before Jesus’ birth.
But how was the suffering servant understood by the Jews of Jesus’ time, indeed by Jesus himself? Rabbinic interpretation, acknowledged by the early church father Origen, identifies the suffering servant in Isaiah 52-53 as a personification of the nation of Israel, which had repeatedly suffered at the hands of Gentile oppressors.

According to the rabbinic interpretation, the speakers of the Isaiah passage are the startled kings of the surrounding nations: “Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” These kings, in the messianic age in which the passage is set, humbly admit that a righteous people has suffered at their hands. At last, the Jewish people will be rewarded for their faith, and they will return from exile.

At the time when Jesus lived, Judaism was a diverse religion. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were influential factions with differing beliefs and practices. Other first-century Jewish factions included the Essenes, the Zealots, the Jews of the Diaspora who were influenced by Greek and Roman culture, Herodians, Hasideans, followers of John the Baptist, and those Jews who followed Jesus and believed he was the Messiah and Son of God.

Belief in salvation by a messiah at the end time was an acceptable concept among Jews. It would be possible to affirm belief in Jesus as savior and still be part of the first-century Jewish community; this community would not have rejected belief in a messiah, but did not necessarily believe in this particular messiah. Thus, the family from Bethany – Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, as described in John 11 – could comfortably live within the Jewish community and still profess faith in Jesus as Christ and Son of God.

Biblical scholars suggest that the Johannine community – the community for which John the Evangelist wrote – consisted of Jews whose belief in Jesus involved a relatively low Christology. The writer of the Gospel according to John, however, advocates a higher Christology. We have seen that belief in Jesus as Messiah did not necessarily require separation from the surrounding Jewish community; the problem is one of identity. The core of the Jewish identity was adherence to the law, circumcision, and observation of the Sabbath and certain festivals. Messianism would be only a tangential aspect of identity. For the Johannine writer, the core of community identity lay in professing Jesus as Christ and Son of God. This amounted to a rejection of the community’s Jewish roots and led to a collision course with the Jewish authorities; claiming that Jesus was God’s equal was going too far.
Hostility was inevitable as the Jesus-believing Jews came to see their movement as one distinct from Jewish identity. The split between high and low Christology is explicit in John 19, verse 7: “The Jews answered him, ‘We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.’” This emphasis on a separate identity, this separation into Us and Them, is disturbing, ugly, and dangerous to most ears today. In John, the bad guys, the Christ-killers, are the chief priests and Pharisees, the Jewish police, the Jewish crowd. The Jews. The Romans and Pontius Pilate are explicitly exonerated. The blame falls squarely on the Jews, who seem to have enlisted the Romans’ help to avoid killing the man themselves, which would have been both illegal and caused ritual uncleanness at the beginning of Passover.

We know that there are historical and theological reasons for John’s language about the Jews. We know that John wrote at a time when the Jewish followers of Jesus were carving out an identity separate from their parent Jewish community. Yet we cannot erase the centuries of ugly persecution of our Jewish neighbors that have resulted from the Us and Them separation created by John’s text.

And so, we are left with the beauty, pain, and polemic of John’s Gospel. This is Good Friday. For a moment, politics and history fall away, and we are left with the poetry of the Passion according to John. We stand at the foot of the cross. Peter and the disciples are confused and terrified. The three Marys are heartbroken. One of the most human and moving moments in the Passion is the passage where Jesus gives his mother into the care of the Beloved Disciple. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus overcome their doubts and fears enough to ask Pilate for Jesus’ body. We have reached the time and place when the body is in the tomb. A time of darkness. A time when death seems to have triumphed. A time when it is difficult to have faith.

John tells us that Jesus knew all that was going to happen to him. The hearers of the tale in John’s community knew. We know what is going to happen. This story is headed towards hope, death overcome, the certainty of the Resurrection. Yet over and over again, our hearts break for the disciples, for Jesus’ mother, for all who loved him.

On the night before he died, in the Farewell Discourse, Jesus spoke of how his followers are to live when he is gone. We are to live in faith that we will see him again. We are to learn from and be comforted by the Holy Spirit. We are to love one another as he has loved us. We are to live in unity with God and with one another.
Let us pray: Gracious God, may we love each other as Christ loved us. May we
gather in community, in our times of grief and despair as in times of gladness.
May we turn toward the day when weeping and mourning will turn to joy, by
the power of the Holy Spirit. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Susan Butterworth, M.A., M.Div., is a writer, teacher, singer, and lay minister. She leads
Song & Stillness: Taizé @ MIT, a weekly ecumenical service of contemplative Taizé prayer
at the interfaith chapel at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She sings with Threshold
Singers, a group that sings at hospice bedside. She teaches writing and literature to college
undergraduates and writes essays and literary reference articles.
The Great Vigil of Easter

COLLECT
O God, who made this most holy night to shine with the glory of the Lord’s resurrection: Stir up in your Church that Spirit of adoption which is given to us in Baptism, that we, being renewed both in body and mind, may worship you in sincerity and truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

THE PASchal SERMON
by St. John Chrysostom

Are there any who are devout lovers of God? Let them enjoy this beautiful bright festival! Are there any who are grateful servants? Let them rejoice and enter into the joy of their Lord! Are there any weary with fasting? Let them now receive their wages!

If any have toiled from the first hour, let them receive their due reward; if any have come after the third hour, let him with gratitude join in the Feast! And he that arrived after the sixth hour, let him not doubt; for he too shall sustain no loss. And if any delayed until the ninth hour, let him not hesitate; but let him come too. And he who arrived only at the eleventh hour, let him not be afraid by reason of his delay. For the Lord is gracious and receives the last even as the first. He gives rest to him that comes at the eleventh hour, as well as to him that toiled from the first.

To this one he gives, and upon another he bestows. He accepts the works as he greets the endeavor. The deed he honors and the intention he commends. Let us all enter into the joy of the Lord! First and last alike receive your reward; rich and poor, rejoice together! Sober and slothful, celebrate the day! You that have kept the fast, and you that have not, rejoice today for the Table is richly laden! Feast royally on it, the calf is a fatted one. Let no one go away hungry.
Partake, all, of the cup of faith. Enjoy all the riches of his goodness! Let no one grieve at his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed. Let no one mourn that he has fallen again and again; for forgiveness has risen from the grave. Let no one fear death, for the Death of our Savior has set us free. He has destroyed it by enduring it. He destroyed Hell when he descended into it. He put it into an uproar even as it tasted of his flesh. Isaiah foretold this when he said, “You, O Hell, have been troubled by encountering him below.”

Hell was in an uproar because it was done away with. It was in an uproar because it is mocked. It was in an uproar, for it is destroyed. It is in an uproar, for it is annihilated. It is in an uproar, for it is now made captive. Hell took a body, and discovered God. It took earth, and encountered Heaven. It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.

O death, where is thy sting? O Hell, where is thy victory? Christ is Risen, and you, O death, are annihilated! Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down! Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice! Christ is Risen, and life is liberated! Christ is Risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead; for Christ having risen from the dead, is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. To him be Glory and Power forever and ever. Amen!
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**Christopher Sikkema**
Coordinator for Digital Evangelism
The Episcopal Church Office of Communications
csikkema@episcopalchurch.org

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