

Easter Season

In Awe of Grace

Every day is a holy day if you live into the truth of the ever-present God. Every moment is a moment rich with possibility and hope; every relationship is a potential insight into the activity of the Spirit; every conversation is a living word of grace and peace. “Best of all,” John Wesley supposedly said as his last words, “God is with us.” Amen.

Yet there are times and seasons that seem even more holy. There are moments that reverberate with the living presence of the living God, and our only proper response is to fall to our knees in awe of grace. These eight days are one of those times. Some argue they are the preeminent days when history, our history, and our understanding of self and God and life itself all changed. From Palm Sunday through Easter, the world is remade, a new creation, and we are blessed to be a part of it, blessed to receive a gift beyond words, which is nothing less than eternity itself.

Palm/Passion Sunday is technically the end of the season of Lent and is usually included in the Lenten worship series. This year, however, we decided to put together this short series to shepherd us through this roller coaster of a week, attempting to touch on the highs and the lows and the ever-present redeeming grace of God. While we didn’t include services for Monday through Wednesday of Holy Week, it would be easy to do so. Carry through the sense of wonder and amazement; walk with Jesus in the last week of his incarnated and earthly life. Read the story and then bow in wonder, reflect in awe, corporately or individually. Give your congregation guides to prayer for them to use at home or call them together to worship on bended knee. But we invite reflection and prayer, confession, and thanksgiving for this amazing week. Invite your congregation this Holy Week and Easter to stand in awe of grace.

Palm/Passion Sunday – This Is the Day

April 2, 2023

[Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29](#); [Matthew 21:1-11](#); [Matthew 26:14-27:66](#)

Color: Purple or Red

PLANNING NOTES

Today is a day that can stretch even the most creative worship team. It is difficult to fully express both the exuberance of the Palm Sunday processional and the agony of the Passion of the Christ. The first decision, then, is, “Which do you feature?” Which gets the emphasis on this Sunday morning?

It is hard to resist the parade. There is something special about marching around the sanctuary, or even out into the neighborhood if you’re brave enough, waving palm branches and shouting Hosanna. There is certainly a need for celebration, especially when you couple it with a declaration of faith in the one we call the Prince of Peace. So, unpack the symbols and be sure that everyone hears the announcement. Look back to the enthronement Psalms (47, 93, 96-99) as a reminder of the kind of joy and proclamation that this event recalled. And give voice to the plea for salvation, shout “hosanna” at the top of your lungs. Recruit the children where possible; they love to shout, even when they don’t know what it all means. But let there be a loud-voiced invitation to the one we call Savior.

And move! March around the sanctuary, into the aisles, and up to the chancel. Dance if you can; march if that feels better, or just walk. Walk and wave as a way of drawing attention; you're trying to catch the eye of the rider whose eyes are full of tears for you and for the fate of the city and the world you inhabit.

That's the hint, those tears, that broken heart. "If only," the Savior says. "If only you knew the things that made for peace." If the bulk of the service is around the exuberance of the parade, let there be a hint at the end that there is more. There is poignancy; there is suffering to come; there is a threat to the peace we long for, the justice we hope for. Let there be a sign that you know this isn't a walk in the park, but something deeper, something more involved, something in which to be invested, though it will cost something, from him first but then from you as well. Let there be a minor key in the postlude at least. Let the declaration end with a recognition that there are difficult days ahead. Let the benediction be more desperate, more urgent, as you look for the good word in a dark time. Let the weight of what is to come rest on each and all of you as you prepare for this Holy Week to come.

On the other hand, some might want to open with the parade but then pivot early to the Passion story. It is a time of preparation. Many who attend on Sunday might not come on Thursday or Friday. So we all need a reminder of the story; we need to take our place around the table in the upper room, in the darkness of the garden, when sleep overwhelms us and then chaos reigns. We need a moment to listen from the courtyard as the trial commences and then the accusations fly, and the denial rises unbidden from our hearts. We need to stand on that skull-shaped hill and hear the hammer blows and the raspy voice offering forgiveness and grace almost unimaginable. We need a reminder of this before we make our way to the cemetery very early in the morning on Easter. Tell the story; depict it in whatever ways give meaning and depth to your people.

In some way, both need to be present today—both the declaration and the death, both the parade and the passion. You determine the ratio, what the community can bear and what else is coming in the days ahead. But don't shortchange the people who need to hear the whole story, who need to make the whole journey. This is the only way we can all stand in awe of grace.

PREACHING NOTES

This is the day that the Lord has made. For us. Because of us. It could be argued that out of all these high and holy days, this one is the most ... human. "Well, of course," you might think. This week is a divine and human encounter; in fact, we might argue it is THE divine and human encounter. This is true; but hear me out. This day, this slash day, this Palm/Passion Day is the most human day of this whole event.

Next Sunday is God's day – the event is God's, and we simply receive it like the gift that it is. Good Friday is the day where sin is exposed in all its ugliness – or it is the day when agape love is revealed in all its glory and wonder. Maundy Thursday is Jesus' day (I realize they are all about Jesus) when he tries one more time to teach by example and by word what it means to follow him.

But this day is our day. Yes, it is the day Jesus chose to make a declaration, the day he claimed the ritual and the pageantry of triumphal entry and of royal enthronement. Yes, it is the day when he claimed the crown and the throne that was his from the beginning of creation. We don't want to take away from that reality, that truth. So, if this was only Palm Sunday, then we could step back and let the parade pass us by and let our role be one of waving branches and shouting for salvation, which is what "hosanna"

meant originally – “save us.” Many take that route, focusing all the energy on the Palm Sunday declaration and the festive potential of the triumphal parade. Yet somehow and somewhere within the time of worship on this day, there needs to be at least a pointer, a hint of what is to come. There needs to be an understanding of what this declaration cost the one we call the Prince of Peace.

When we create an event called Palm/Passion Sunday, then it becomes an event that tells the truth about us as clearly as it tells the truth about him. Where else could we in the space of one act of worship let collide our full-throated shouts of praise and our blood-thirsty calls for a painful death? “Hosanna” and “crucify him” should not be in the same week, let alone in the same hour, except for the condition of our souls and the ephemeral nature of our faith. And to declare that that was then and then and not us and now is to miss the point of the remembrance of the event. We were there. Or rather he is here, and this event is here. And one of the overriding questions for this day is, “Where do we stand?” On this parade day, where do we stand? In the place of judgment, where do we stand? When he stands before us, bloodied and beaten, where do we stand and what do we say?

I’ve never been in a parade. That doesn’t bother me all that much. I mean, who wants all the attention? The adulation of the crowds, the cheers and the waves, the throng lining the streets, wanting to be you. In that moment, you are the center of attention, the brightest star in the firmament, the man of the hour, the woman of the year. Who wouldn’t want to be in a parade?

Do you think that was why he did it? For the attention, for the adulation? Knowing what was to come, did he just want to soak up a little bit of honor before being subjected to the shame and suffering that was to be his lot? Who could blame him if that was the reason? And yet it doesn’t seem quite right, that even here on this threshold, the one who would soon be on his knees washing the dust of the city streets off the feet of those called his followers, would be so self-serving on that first Palm Sunday.

We’ve come around to the parade again. That odd little celebration marked by palm leaves and shouting in church. Maybe if you are one of that go-all-out kind of church, you even bring in a donkey to parade up and down the aisle of your sanctuary, while the trustees keep a wary eye on the trailing end, just in case.

So many questions come to mind as we read this story. Was this prearranged, or was it somehow mystical, or did the disciples commit grand donkey larceny? If the crowd was really as large as Matthew says, then who was the “whole city” asking the identity question from the fringes of the parade? Or was this the first instance of a “preacher estimate”? And how did Jesus manage to sit on a donkey and its colt at the same time? Was the crowd drawn by some sort of divine balancing act? And did the homeowners lining the impromptu parade route complain about the crowd pulling branches off the trees?

More importantly, however, the real question was, “Did they get it?” This was a message Jesus was trying to send. Matthew got it. It may have taken him some years after the fact, but he got it. That’s why he dredges up Zechariah’s words to help us get the point. The king who comes, not on a war horse, but on a donkey of peace. Did they get it?

They shouted “hosanna”; that implies they got it. “Hosanna” translates as “Save us!” So maybe they got it. Matthew says the crowd was large. Maybe they got it or wanted to get it, anyway. But then the city was clueless, “Who is this?” And maybe the city and the crowd were marching side by side; maybe the

crowd was large but was made up of followers and city dwellers, some who got it many who didn't. Maybe they were marching along waving their branches and shouting "hosanna" (which scholars tell us came to mean "hooray" or even "howdy" by that time, not the prayer of petition that it once meant. It is sort of like the word "goodbye," which was originally a blessing—"God be with you"—but now is nothing more than a wave, a signal, a cipher). Their brows were furrowed, and they would turn to the one beside them and ask, "Why are doing this again?" And maybe the response would be a shrug. Maybe it would be, "That's Jesus, the guy from Galilee." "Oh, right" they would say, pretending to know who in the world Jesus from Galilee was.

Did they get it? It is hard to say. One thing Matthew is clear about is that disaster was right around the corner. If there was any hope that Jesus was using this event to soak up a little good will, it would be shattered by the very next verse. The parade didn't end with handshakes all around and a few high fives for a job well done. No, it trundled all the way from the gates of the city to the temple where Jesus turned over some tables and knocked over some dove cages. It ended with a rumble. The self-proclaimed king of peace engages in an act of violence that left them shocked and confused. What peace was he announcing? What peace was he bringing? And if you are going to strike a blow, why not strike against the foreign oppressors and not the economic machinery of our own people?

Especially when that machinery will strike back. Wouldn't it have been better to keep a low profile? Couldn't he have just left a note, made a speech, wrote an editorial for the *Sunday Jerusalem Times* about the proper use of the Temple? Wouldn't that have been better? Safer, anyway? Why did he have to provoke?

All kinds of questions come to our minds when we pay attention to the parade on Palm Sunday. Questions that, perhaps in worship this weekend, you won't even attempt to answer. This is, instead, a listening Sunday, an experiencing Sunday, not an answer Sunday. Somehow you need everyone to come and hear what the parade turns into. To come and hear what steps are taken once he dismounts that donkey. To come and pick up a branch and see if they want to walk along in this parade; to come and see if they have it in them to shout "hosanna," or if the word gets caught in the throat. Or mixed up with another word, one of frustration and anger, one of despair and hopelessness.

The same crowd that shouted "hosanna" on Sunday began to shout "crucify him" on Friday. How much more human can we be? This is the day we are revealed. This is the day our hearts of hope are broken. This is the day that the Lord has made.

Maundy Thursday – Commanded to Love

April 6, 2023

[Exodus 12:1-4 \(5-10\) 11-14; John 13:1-17, 31b-35](#)

Color: Purple or Red

PLANNING NOTES

Maundy Thursday. Or perhaps you prefer Holy Thursday. Either fits this day. But the title you choose might depend on the emphasis you wish to provide during this act of worship. The “Maundy” in Maundy Thursday, as you know, comes from the Latin word for commandment. If you have a tradition of reenacting the foot washing from the Gospel of John, then you want to name this day Maundy Thursday. The commandment has to do with love that is embodied in service. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another” (John 13:34 NRSV). This is the command to love we suggest for this service. It might seem unreasonable to command love, but that is what Jesus does. This means that part of what we need to do here is to help people understand what this kind of love means. When Jesus says, “as I have loved you,” he is pointing back to the washing of the disciples’ feet. The command is to serve in loving ways. This isn’t about an emotion or a feeling toward others; it is an act that we can perform.

Yes, of course, the spirit in which we perform this act matters. But we can always ask, “Where does the spirit come from? Is it something we concoct before we act, or is it something that we discover in the serving?” It’s not an either/or, we know. But for many, the attitude grows and changes when we act in loving ways. We are overwhelmed by the very grace we are offering. We are transformed by that grace, and we discover that we are merely conduits for something that comes from beyond us.

Likewise, the meal we remember is not just a ritual or a reenactment. It is also an act of loving service. How might we serve this meal? How might we celebrate Communion where the community is even more evident as we gather? If you are used to standing in a line or kneeling in a row to receive the elements, maybe this time, you sit around a table or stand in a circle and serve one another, look one another in the eye and see real people in need of grace, just like we are. Maybe this time, you have a child serve instead of the pastor. Maybe this time, you set up tables and sit in groups and give time for sharing and listening to one another before and as you serve one another. Let the bread and the cup be a sign of the service that will continue once the service has concluded. Let the healing and the feeding of the soul go deeper than the surface and last longer than the moment of serving. This is a commitment, a commandment to live a new way. To live a better way. Commanded to love.

PREACHING NOTES

The Exodus instructions allow us to focus on the meal. Maundy Thursday is an appropriate time to remember where the sacrament of Holy Communion originated and what it represented on that first Last Supper. But you might need to turn to another Gospel—this is Matthew’s year—for help in translating the instructions for Passover into the ritual that we call Communion. There is power in remembering together on this night why we treasure the bite of bread and the sip of juice time after time. There is a deepening of understanding that transcends this reenactment of a sacrificial meal and an offering of self and of presence.

But the name of the day itself, and the John text assigned, diminishes the meal in favor of the teaching. We focus not on the establishment of a ritual, but on the description of a way of living in community and interacting with the world.

I know it is useless to try and ascribe inner thoughts to the actors in the gospel drama, but I can't help but wonder what was going through Jesus' mind when he got up and grabbed the towel and the basin. Was it a sigh at how such an important cultural greeting was missed by those who were charged to prepare the meal? Was it a light-bulb moment where he thought, "Maybe if I show them what I mean, they'll finally get it?" Was it yet another opportunity to present his incarnated message, to be the words that he spoke? Or was it just a matter of course – he saw a need and got up to fill it, not thinking for a moment about how they would respond to such an act?

In the minds of the disciples, there was something demeaning about kneeling to serve in such a humbling way. That's why they all managed to overlook the opportunity. But for Jesus, it wasn't demeaning; it was an opportunity. An opportunity to serve. More than that, it was an opportunity to be who he came to be, to fulfill his purpose. After all, he said, "The Son of Man came to serve, not to be served."

All the teaching about the action came later, when they were confused. "Do you know what I have done for you?" Nope, he could read it in their eyes; they didn't get it. They were still looking for the best seats; they were still looking for their rewards in heaven, or on earth. They didn't know what he had done, which means they didn't know him. At all. We sometimes envy the disciples, because they got to spend time with him; they got to hear his voice and see his eyes; they watched his hands; they were right there. And they didn't get it. They didn't have any advantage.

Later on, Jesus says "I'm giving you a new commandment." That's where the word *Maundy* comes from. The Latin *maundatum* or *command*. The new commandment, he says later is "Love one another as I have loved you." Except it wasn't new, not really. He had already acted it out in front of them. "As I have loved you." By serving, by getting on his knees, by bending to a task that even fishermen thought was beneath them. "Love as I loved," says Jesus.

It wasn't supposed to be a once-a-year command. The church has turned Maundy Thursday into quite a ritual over the years. The pope would find some beggars - or his people would find some beggars – and then very publicly wash their feet. The monarch of England would do the same until it got too uncomfortable for them; now they hand out some money – "Maundy Money," it's called. Once a year.

But it was never supposed to be a ritual. It was supposed to be a way of life. Oh, foot-washing isn't a part of our culture; that isn't necessarily what is supposed to be carried on. It is the willingness to serve that is the command. The Maundy. On Thursday, or Monday. Or any day. Sometimes it's a good day, all you hoped it to be. Other times it seems cruel, not what you expected. That's a part of the risk of service. Sometimes it doesn't turn out as you hoped; sometimes it isn't received as you intended. And our inclination is to stop rather than risk doing it wrong. At least until we remember that each day is a holy day in a holy week and therefore an opportunity to serve, to love in action and in truth not just in words. We remember that Maundy, the commandment to love as we have been loved, comes again and again. That renewal, that second chance, is part of the awesome grace of this event.

Good Friday – Dancing in the Dark

April 7, 2023

[Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#); [Psalm 22](#); [Hebrews 10:16-25](#); [John 18:1-19:42](#)

Color: No Color

PLANNING NOTES

What is the mood of the Good Friday experience? Many churches prefer the quiet somber reflection on the depth of suffering that our Lord endured on that day. The service is woven through with silence; the words impress upon the hearer the weight of pain and the injustice of the leaders who demanded his death. The music is both a reminder of his decision to suffer and die and our culpability in bringing this sentence upon him. There is darkness, perhaps even a growing darkness of the Tenebrae service where one by one the candles are extinguished along with his life as the story is recounted. Other congregations find ways to depict the story with live actors or through visual art. Maybe we borrow from our Roman Catholic siblings and do a modified Stations of the Cross as a way of walking through the story.

For some, this is a corporate event, and together we relive those painful, precious moments of awesome grace. For others, it is an individual exercise that we might do at the same time, but we leave individuals to their own inner thoughts and feelings. We provide the space and the support but allow people to walk that journey with Christ in their own minds and bodies and souls.

Sometimes we end the service in silence, or we strip the chancel of all the color and texture if that wasn't done the night before. Maybe we send the worshipers out into the night with a plaintive organ postlude or somber piano piece, or even singing a spiritual or hymn that speaks of the depth of this moment: "O Love Divine, What Hast Thou Done" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 287) or "Were You There" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 288), something that will echo in the hearts and minds of the congregation through the long night ahead.

All of these are appropriate ways of designing worship on this day, and there are other rituals and traditions in your local context that are meaningful to you and to those who worship with you. However, this year, we humbly ask a simple question: "Is there room for joy on Good Friday? And if so, what would that joy look like?" Another way to respond to this question would be to explore the nature of "good news" even in this context. How do we proclaim the good of Good Friday in a way that makes sense to those who come to hear and experience this day? Can we hold on to hope? Can we look forward to Resurrection or does that miss something vital about this day?

As you plan for the Good Friday observance, you might consider the person who comes to this service only – the person who isn't there for Palm/Passion Sunday or Maundy Thursday and won't be back for Easter. What do you want this unnamed person to walk away with on this day? What gift do you give from this moment of awesome grace?

PREACHING NOTES

How do you preach on this day? Maybe you don't. Maybe you simply tell the story. Read the Passion story, extinguish the candles one by one, and leave the sanctuary in darkness. Maybe you set up a

tableau in the chancel and let it speak for itself. Maybe you drive the nails and affix your own sinfulness or brokenness to the rough wood of the cross and let the sound of hammering be the proclamation that declares the weight of sin and the glory of redemption. Maybe there aren't words to capture this event. Maybe there is no way to explain what has taken theologians centuries of time and gallons of ink to even scratch the surface of the layers of meaning that our human minds cannot grasp completely. Maybe we simply stand at the foot of the cross with awe and wonder, with tears and shame, with doubt and faith wrestling within.

Perhaps the compulsion is strong, however, and you feel a need to exhort or proclaim, to encourage and name something of this day. Then you could stand with Isaiah (52:13-53:12) and gaze at this servant so broken and bruised and somehow prospering. It requires a new understanding of what it means to prosper and a stomach strong enough to endure the suffering inflicted, borne with tight lips and resolute heart. You could sing with the psalmist (22) who calls for praise in the midst of abandonment and suffering, the song that Jesus sang as he hung on the cross that dark afternoon as the dogs encircled and his heart melted like wax. Or you could gather before the preacher of Hebrews (10:16-25) and take notes on the covenant and the curtain of blood for the examination of forgiveness as a way of working through the event. Or you can simply gather and see what the Spirit has in store for you and your congregation this day. You might be surprised by grace, as I was some years ago leading a Good Friday service in my church at the time.

A few years earlier, I found a Good Friday service based on the Stations of the Cross. It was part dramatic reading, written from the perspective of the Centurion who oversaw Jesus' journey to the cross and death on that cross, and burial in the garden tomb. With a certain amount of dramatic license, the Centurion helps us reflect on the impact of this death on all of us. He struggled with this job because it was different this time, he discovers, though he isn't quite sure why.

The reflections from the Centurion are wrapped up with a statement on each particular Station of the Cross and with a concluding prayer, and the Stations are interspersed with the congregation singing various verses from the Passion hymns. It was very well written, taking us deep into the emotion and the meaning of the Good Friday event.

I had used it previously with a more traditional, male voice reading the Centurion role consistently. But this time, I thought I would do something different. I wanted different voices reading that part, as though the Centurion was an Everyman or even Every-person as I had female voices reading those lines at times. And then I was struck with a novel idea for casting. I asked my associate pastor, Chris, if he thought his wife, Joy, would join my wife, La Donna, and me as the four readers of this script. Joy not only agreed; she also wanted to play the flute for the hymns and as a solo anthem piece in the middle. It all seemed to be set and ready for a powerful experience for all involved.

What I didn't count on was Charlotte. Charlotte was Chris and Joy's youngest daughter, a preschooler who decided that Good Friday evening that only mom would do. Though there were church members aplenty assigned to the task of watching Charlotte during the service, she would have none of it. Even her dad was no consolation for the poor girl, who cried her eyes out (not to mention exercised her lungs) in Chris's office when Joy went to practice before the service. Though those assigned childminders tried valiantly, everyone could all see the arrangement just wasn't going to work. So, at the last minute, as the prelude was playing, a change was made to the program, and Charlotte joined us in the chancel.

When Joy played her flute, Charlotte would sit on the floor near her mother's feet or on a seat her mother had just vacated, partially hidden by the grand piano; and all was well. But when Joy would step up to the lectern to take her turn at reading from the wonderful script, dramatically presenting to us the impressions of the Stations of the Cross, Charlotte would wander. And by wander, I don't mean to imply that she would walk demurely with her mother from her seat behind to the piano to the lectern in the front of the chancel where she would wait patiently until Joy was finished reading before walking calmly back to her seat. No. If you think that is what she did throughout the service, then you don't know Charlotte. Charlotte took full opportunity of the freedom of that space to explore each corner. Keeping her mother in sight, she would stroll to the center of the open chancel and then back toward Joy. She discovered that she could wander outside of the chancel, walking on the kneeling step and holding onto the Communion rails like an office worker getting some air on a high ledge downtown. Once, she discovered the unique acoustics of the space and stomped her foot on the stone tile just to hear the echo. Only once. She wove around the chancel furniture, tracing a labyrinthine path that only she knew, circling the Christ candle on its tall brass pole and back to the lectern where her mother stood. It was a sight to behold.

The dramatist in me was squirming, I must confess. The carefully constructed experience was at risk here, the heaviness of the passion of the Christ and the depth of the Stations were being swallowed up by this cherub with a cloud of blond curls dancing around the chancel without a care in the world, except that mom was in sight. For the first time, I had a little sympathy for the disciples that day when they told the parents to keep their kids away from Jesus because they were doing serious stuff, only to be made to be the bad guys when Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them."

"For to such as these belongs the Kingdom." It was the theologian in me that came to the rescue. As I watched the little sprite dancing in the face of the darkness of Good Friday, I suddenly recognized her. It was hope. It was that little ribbon of sustenance that was how they made it through to Easter morning, fluttering here and there, outside and inside, tracing circles around the flame of Presence, even - and pay attention here - even when it was put out.

Holy Saturday has always puzzled me. How did those women have the wherewithal to prepare the spices? How did the broken and despairing disciples manage to not run screaming into the hillside, afraid for their own souls as well as their bodies now that the hammer had begun to fall? How did they follow him to the cross, even at a distance, and hover outside a tomb no matter how lovely the garden surrounding it was? How did they endure the darkness of that day?

Because of Charlotte. Well, maybe not Charlotte in the flesh, but the hope and the joy that she wove in and through the sadness and the pain. Maybe they couldn't dance in their own darkness, but hope was there, hidden, almost smothered, but tenacious, determined, clinging, unwilling to leave us to wallow in our despair.

What I heard that Good Friday night in the wanderings of little Charlotte is that no matter how much we think it does, the story—God's story and our story—never ends in darkness. The sun does rise again. She was preparing us for the next proclamation, the one that would take our breath away and bring us to our knees in awe and wonder. Without a word, our angel Charlotte proclaimed that death was not the final word and that if we persisted to live in the darkness, then we were simply in the wrong place. He is not here; he is Risen. Alleluia. Even here, even on this dark day, the light will shine.

Holy Saturday - Hush
April 8, 2023
[Matthew 27:57-66](#)

PLANNING NOTES

Why is this here? Most probably don't have services on Holy Saturday. And those who do will most likely do something like the Great Easter Vigil late at night – a prelude to Easter morning:
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/the-great-vigil-of-easter-the-first-service-of-easter-2016>,
and <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/preparing-for-the-easter-vigil>.

The second article walks you through a process for instituting a vigil service if that is new to you and your congregation. This is a great experience for those who want to celebrate the culmination of this season in a unique yet traditional way.

On the other hand, perhaps you want to provide some space on this Holy Saturday for contemplation, for shared grief, for preparation and anticipation. Consider having a small gathering on this in-between day, or maybe a drop-in opportunity for folks to come and sit and think and pray. The sanctuary is open, and maybe there is music playing, or maybe there is simply silence, a place to breathe and to listen for the whispers of the Spirit. There might be some prayer guides, a meditation in place of a sermon, something to read and contemplate. Or maybe a blank sheet of paper for thoughts and prayers, something to speak into the emptiness.

Or this could be sent to homes: an email or download from the church website with some materials to read and reflect upon, an activity or two, or just some instructions on how to spend this day as a family or as individuals at home.

Holy Saturday is a chance to pause and listen, to wait and to watch, a moment of hush. It is time to prepare to head to the cemetery in the early morning, hoping to catch a glimpse of the risen Christ.

PREACHING NOTES

Why is it that some moments and some places just seem to call for quiet? There are times when loud voices just seem out of place, offensive, insensitive. There are times when even speaking at all seems like telling an off-color joke at church, like tromping muddy rain boots across clean white carpets – farm boots in a ballroom. Like ... well, like something that makes you shiver.

There must have been a lot of shivering on the first Holy Saturday, which, I am sure, felt anything but holy to those who had to endure it. The silence had to weigh upon them like an unbearable burden that nonetheless had to be borne. Trudging through the hush was like being waist deep in mud, every movement an effort, every action a strain.

Every beat of their hearts pounded out the wrongness of all that had come to be in the past few days. Every unspoken word that died on their lips shouted at the cruelty of the world they now reluctantly had to inhabit. Every tear that rolled unbidden down numb faces bore silent witness to an inner agony of body and soul.

The hush was a shield that kept the broken reality at arm's length. It was a full body armor that shut out those who couldn't possibly understand; a cave within which to lick wounds too raw to expose to the elements. It was protection as well as the pain of emptiness; it was small comfort in an experience of discomfort.

We are uncomfortable with silence, even when that is all we have. We feel inadequate in the face of the hush. "I just didn't know what to say," we complain, we confess. We wanted to fill the silence but didn't have any words.

Yes, there were words spoken on this day. The silence was broken, but not by the followers of this one who was crucified. At least that Matthew records. Even at the end of that terrible, yet somehow Good Friday, the words are muted. In the Gospel text assigned for Holy Saturday (Matthew 27:57-66), we read of Joseph asking for the body. But there is no quote. It is almost as if he mimed it or whispered it under his breath, afraid to make complete sentences out of his request. Even Pilate's response doesn't get words, just a nod, perhaps, a wave of the governor's hand giving permission and dismissal both.

But then there is Saturday. Was it really Saturday? The Sabbath day? A special Sabbath day coming in the midst of the Passover celebration? Did the leaders, the Jewish leaders, actually go to Pilate, the Gentile governor, and speak of conspiracy? Surely these words were whispered in the back channels of governmental communication. Conspiracies concocted and promoted on this holy day. These words get spoken, Matthew records, behind closed doors, in the hallways of power. But the final word spoken is a bluster of power in the face of powerlessness. Use your guards, use your power, make it as secure as you can. This silence is stronger than your speech. This hush is more powerful than your words. Do what you can against the conspiracies of your own mind, but be ready to be disappointed. They went out in the silence of the grave to seal the tomb against powers they couldn't comprehend. And we are left with nothing but silence.

On the other hand, there is silence and *there is silence*. There is silence that hurts, that beats down, that reveals inadequacies; and there is silence that heals, that gathers up, that binds hearts. Easter comes in silence. Don't think so? Re-read Matthew's Easter story in preparation for tomorrow of course, but also to live into the silence of Holy Saturday. As we suggest in the Planning Notes, maybe this is homework, family time, something that happens away from the sanctuary in the quietness of each heart. Maybe there isn't preaching on this day; maybe the silence preaches. Maybe you print a message out, this message, or one you write yourself, and email it or post it on your church's website or Facebook page and invite folks to read it in their silence. The hush of Holy Saturday. As we prepare. As we get into the mindset that drives us to the cemetery on Easter morning. Why did they go? What were they hoping to do?

Matthew says the women went to see. There was no carrying of baskets of spices, no task awaiting them, no conversation about the weight of the stone that covered the entrance to his tomb. They went, with silence clinging to them, to see. To see if this terrible dream was, in fact, reality. To see if all they had come to believe in was now rubble. To see the stone of death and darkness so that they could dash their hopes against those rocks.

Matthew, the seismologist, says there was yet another earthquake. Were they standing there before the tomb, weeping in the silence, when the ground began to shake? Did they see that figure, that embodied light, roll back the stone as though it had no more substance than a dream? And did he/she/it then

proceed to sit on it like a wrestler announcing victory over vanquished foes? When he spoke, did it sound like lightning slashing through the air? Did her voice make their hair stand on end?

"I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified." Were they? Were they looking for him? Or were they hoping not to see him? Or were they just putting one foot in front of the other, trying to find a starting point for the rest of their lives? But then you can see their brows furrow in confusion as the glowing figure announces that they've come to the wrong place. There's no one here by that description, he tells them. There is no one lying decaying on a slab of stone that you might have, at one time, recognized, that you might have, at one time, loved with your whole being. No, not at this address.

But wait, he grins into their confusion, he left a forwarding order. He left an invitation; she smiles toward them. First of all, take a look, since I can tell you aren't with me yet, then go, gather up the gang, and get on the road. He's on his way. The one you came to pay your respects to, the one you thought was lying on a stone slab behind a rock door, that one is up and about and on his way.

And they haven't said a word. Did you notice that? In all this wondrous encounter, the silence still grips them. They stumble away from the lightning clad being and start to hightail it out of there. Going to tell, as they were told, perhaps. But just getting away from a place of death that wasn't any more toward a place of hope they thought they'd lost. But they didn't take two steps, maybe three; who's counting? And suddenly it happened. Suddenly Jesus. Suddenly, death no longer had the last word. Suddenly, the end wasn't the end. Suddenly, the certainties of living in this world were no longer so certain. So, they did the only thing that made any sense at that moment. They fell down. No, wait, there's more. They fell down and grabbed hold, and they held on for dear life. Or they held on *to* dear life—the life that had been with them until it was nailed so cruelly to a cross and left to die along the side of a road. The life that had defined them, had remade them, had claimed them. That's the life they clung to on that dusty road that first Easter morning. And they worshiped. Him, they worshiped Him.

But what did they say? What hymns did they sing? What prayers did they pray? What anthems rang out on that cemetery road; what sermons were proclaimed to the feet of one who died yet lives? Nothing. Well, nothing was recorded. It could have been babbling, or it could have been eloquent. It could have been remembered psalms and prayers; it could have been impromptu praise. Or, it could have been silence. The hush of wonder and awe.

Why is it that some moments and some places just seem to call for quiet? Because words fail us. As much as we rely on them, as much as we need them to put shape to our experiences and to invite others to know us and be with us, there are times when they fail us. When there aren't words to define, to border, to shape our experience, all we are left with is silence. But not a silence that drags us down, that burdens our hearts. This is a silence, this is a hush, that lifts our spirits and ushers us into the presence - no, the Presence - of the Holy.

Oh, there is a time for shouting, and it is right around the corner. They will get to their feet in a moment and will run with the wind, shouting the disciples' names and the news they've been given. But for now, in this moment... be still and know. Hush.

Easter Day – The End That Wasn't

April 10, 2023

[Matthew 28:1-10](#) or [John 20:1-18](#)

Color: White or Gold

PLANNING NOTES

If Holy Saturday is a day of quiet contemplation, a hush in our busy lives; then Easter is a shout of jubilation that shakes the foundation of our presuppositions about what makes a good life. As we've noted in previous years, this is a day that almost plans itself. There are traditions and expectations aplenty for Easter. It is good to let them be, to lean into what the congregation sees as powerful worship on this day when they bring far-flung family members home to church with them. It is hard to imagine being "too big" for worship on Easter Sunday. So, pull out the stops; shout from the rooftops. Let all the voices be heard; the children need to have a place or a song to sing. Young people can act out the story or bring a contemporary feel to the event. This is not a story only to be heard, but a story to be lived, to be performed. The more people involved in making Easter worship, the better.

But hearing the story is important too. Read it, proclaim it, sing it, perform it. Let it ring in our ears with awesome joy. We are stricken this day, not with fear, but the opposite of fear: with confidence, with certainty of faith. We claim the central truth of our faith, that Jesus the Christ is not dead but was raised and is alive. Our job this day is simply to embrace that promise and to live that joy. We stand in awe of the grace of God who would not leave us alone in our brokenness and sin, but provides the means for our redemption and the community who offers acceptance and healing.

So be awesome! Is that asking too much? Find a way to take people's breath away, something that will make them want to say "amen" or applaud with tears in their eyes. Give a sense of hope and gratitude for them to take away and live with for a while. That sounds daunting, but it isn't really. People have come to worship today, wanting their hearts to be warmed, their faith to be shored up. On this day, they are meeting you more than halfway. Bring them the rest of the way today. Set the stage with intent and with flair. Be as creative as possible, with simple resources, a bit of cloth, some flowers gathered from your own gardens, a stone, or an open door.

But while today is a day of rejoicing and celebration, it is also a call to move out. We are, above all things, followers – that's what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ. We follow where he leads us; we go where he sends us. We move out into the world to live our proclamation in acts of service and in hospitality. To live in awe of grace is not to be stunned into inaction, but to live each day alive with possibility and hope, with love and with peace and longing for the kin-dom of God that brings justice and community and wholeness. Happy Easter.

PREACHING NOTES

This is it. The end of the line. Our journey is complete. We began Lent by wandering in the wilderness, acknowledging our hungers. We encountered Jesus on the way. We came to him by night for a confusing conversation about claiming life, and a promise of love that we cling to even in our darkness. Especially in our darkness. We met him in the middle of our day, when we hoped we wouldn't be noticed, and he told us everything we had ever done, and he loved us anyway. So, we ran and told everyone we knew, even those we had hoped to avoid by going to the well at noon. We felt him rubbing

mud on our eyes so that we could see what we had never seen before, and whole new vistas opened up before us, and even though those around us couldn't see what we saw and doubted that we were anything other than the blind one we had been before, we reveled in the light that he brought into our lives. Then the stone we had been hiding behind, the stone that blocked our way forward, that cut off our air, crushed our hope, was rolled away at his command; and we walked forth, blinking in the light of life. He did that for us, we remembered. We wept tears of joy and hope; we clung to him, wanting to stop and dwell, to set up camp, to just be. He wouldn't stop.

He kept moving forward, and we went with him, not wanting the light to dim, not wanting the life to fade. We went with him, waving our palms and shouting with joy and with hope, "Hosanna. Save us. Claim us. Want us; we are yours, for now and always, yours." He rode on our carpet of many colors as we cast our coats before him. He acknowledged our shouts and promises of allegiance with a sadness we couldn't grasp. Our joy was real. Our commitment was deep. We were his. He kept moving.

We sat at the table as he lifted the bread. He told us it was him. The bread, somehow, was him. His body, broken into as many pieces as we needed, would need, now and into eternity. We ate with clouded eyes and confused minds. He was here, right here with us. Why did we need this bread to be him? The cup he raised, giving thanks for the fruit of the vine and the sweetness we would drink, then he gave it to us and said to drink, because it was him. His blood, his very life, poured out, as though a sword had pierced his side, flowing down to cover us, to cover our sin, all that would keep us from him, from clinging to him, as we had just promised we would. We drank, tasting the bitter and the sweet, the pain and the promise both. It burned all the way down as we gazed into his eyes and heard his words of the betrayal to come. We prayed with him in the garden at night, tried to stay awake to comfort him, but sleep overcame us, and we left him alone to rail against the night and succumb to the will of the one who sent him.

We walked with him when they came, with swords and clubs, with hatred and fear. We walked with him as they tore him away from us, beat him, and abused him. We walked with him as they laid on him a sentence of death, a cross of shame. We walked with ... No, no we didn't. We wanted to. We thought we did; we promised we would. But it was our fear that tripped us up again. How many times had he told us not to be afraid? And we deserted him in this hour; we denied him; we betrayed him. And now, he walks alone, down those palm-strewn streets, out to the hill; and he gave himself up for us. And the world wept and shook as the darkness descended.

And now here we are. The end of the line. Nowhere left to go. It is as if a conductor has announced the last stop, and we shuffle to the exit with no destination in mind. We stumble blindly in our personal darkness, wondering what happened to hope. We gasp for the breath that now escapes us, as though we had just run a marathon and can't breathe without feeling the pain of our exertion, desperately needing the wind to blow, the air to fill our lungs again. But there is nothing. A stillness. An emptiness. It presses down on us, a weight too heavy for us to bear. All we can think of is death. His death, and ours. He carried us with him when he went. When he breathed his last, he took the air out of our lungs. And now we lie, gasping for life, like the fish we caught that day when he found us and sent us out into the deep water. All those fish. Dead. Like us.

When we can think of nothing but death, where else should we go? We head to the cemetery. Just to look. Just to see. To see the only reality we know anymore. The only certainty we have. Death. His death, and ours. So, we go. Just to look.

What did you go to see? The Marys who went sightseeing in the cemetery, what did they go to see? Death, tombs, stones, and shrouds. They went to weep at the end. The end of the line, nowhere else to go. Nothing else to hope. Just ... death. And life surprised them again. Not a quiet, unassuming life. Not a gentle fluttering of doves. But the ground shook, the stone rolled, a being of light came and sat on the stone as though it was a royal throne that he was keeping warm for someone else. When he spoke, it was like an organ playing, like strings plucked, notes reverberating through the air. Don't be afraid. Still those words are said. Our final nemesis isn't death after all; it's fear. The fear of death, yes, but the fear of abandonment, the fear of failure, the fear of disappointing the one we love more than life itself. We are gripped by fears too many to name, crippling us, binding us, limiting us in ways we barely comprehend. "Don't be afraid," the being of light sang to us. Don't be afraid.

I know, he sang with a smile because he was in on the divine joke, because she was ready with the punchline. I know you seek the dead one. The died one. The killed one. There ain't such a person at this address. No death here, even in the realm of the dead. No one by that name, Jesus the dead one. Unable to forward, person unknown. The orchestra sitting on the stone could barely contain the laughter. But, she chuckled, "if you want Jesus the Risen, I can give you the directions." "I'm your Google maps," he slapped his thigh at that one. "I'm your GPS," she snickered behind a shining hand. Go, the song swells. Go, the strings vibrate, and the horns announce, "Go."

Go where? Go home. Go home, the place you've run from because it bores you. Go home, the place you run to because you think it will keep the world at arm's length, though it fails to do so on a regular basis. Go home and there you will see him surrounded the familiar that now looks different because he breathed life into you. Surrounded by the ordinary that now crackles with the lightning of divinity, the earthquake of love that is stronger than death. Go home, to the place you felt most alone and know you will never be lonely again. Go and see the world in your backyard. Go and see heaven in the earth you know best.

So, they run because they can't think of anything else to do, any reason not to. They run full of hope and the fear that simply won't release its grip on them. On us. We run, with a word. A message. You will see him. You will. See him. Him. Not the dead one, the hung-on-a-cross one, the stripped and beaten and spat-upon one. But the Risen One. The alive one. You'll see him, where you live, at home.

You will see him, that's the message of Easter. You will see him, the living one, the alive one, him. And in that seeing, you'll be able to breathe deeply again. Happy Easter.