

*They Did Not Know What They Did Not Know*

With our palm branches and our hosannas we inaugurate the high and holy week leading up to Easter. But, before we can go “up,” we have to go “down.” Before there can be Easter joy, there must come Good Friday heartbreak. Before there can be a celebration of victory, there must be a groping through defeat. Before there can be a resurrection, there must be a death. Before the stone can be rolled away, the stone must first be sealed over a cold, dark tomb. So in this high and holy week we remember those last several agonizing, gut-wrenching days of Jesus upon this earth.

We remember Jesus saying his solemn good-byes to his disciples gathered with him in the upper room. We remember Jesus saying his desperate prayers in the garden of Gethsemane. We remember Jesus’ betrayal and arrest. We remember Jesus’ arraignment first before Caiaphas and then before Pilate, and we remember Pilate’s expedient judgment. We remember Jesus’ humiliation at the hands of the Roman soldiers. We remember Jesus’ slow and agonizing execution on the Empire’s vile instrument of death, the cross. We remember Jesus’ poignant last words. We remember Jesus’ death, and we remember Jesus’ burial.

So this week, if we are strong enough, if we are brave enough, if we are smart enough, we will go “down.” This week we will dare to let ourselves experience some of the heartbreak of Good Friday. We will dare to take a small taste of the defeat. We will dare to participate in some tiny way in the death. If we are strong enough. If we are brave enough. If we are smart enough.

I say, “if we are smart enough,” because there is hidden in the vulnerability, in the weakness, in the sacrifice, in the suffering as well as in the death of Jesus incredible good news for mortal human beings. It is well hidden, because this incredible good news is not where we would have hoped or expected to find it. It is so well hidden, in fact, that most people miss it, even many Christians miss this incredible good news.

The incredible good news found here, exactly in the depths of the humiliation, the suffering, death, and burial of Jesus Christ is that this way “down” now becomes the pathway of salvation. Appropriating an early hymn of the Church, Paul the Apostle put it this way: that “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but **emptied himself**, taking the form of a **slave**, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he **humbled himself** and became obedient to the point of **death – even death on a cross**. Therefore God also highly **exalted him**.”(Phil 2:5ff) With words and phrases like “emptied himself,” and “slave” and “humbled himself” and “death,” and “cross” the pathway to “exaltation,” to salvation begins to take definition.

And who would have thought it!? Who could have known? Who could have anticipated it? Certainly not those hopeful Jews such as welcomed and cheered and escorted Jesus into the city of Jerusalem. They all had stars in their eyes, these Jews, and Jesus was their star alright, although he would turn out to be a star in a way they would not, could not have expected. But with stars in their eyes anyway, and certainly hope in their hearts, and perhaps even revolution on their minds, there in front of the donkey

carrying Jesus, they lined the streets with palm branches and even their own cloaks and robes and scarves. Stepping prematurely into the role of royal heralds, they accompanied the One whom they hoped would be king – their king!

They wanted a king who would come along and reverse the power equation that had been in place since the first Caesar keeping them “down” on the bottom! They wanted a king who would humiliate their enemies. They wanted a king who would bring them security and prosperity. They wanted a king who would restore the legendary reign of David. They wanted a king who would return them to the glory days of Solomon. They wanted a king who would make Israel the envy of all the nations. Their definition of salvation, then, was deliverance into power, privilege and prosperity. What they might do with all that power, privilege and prosperity I am not sure they had even thought about. Why, they might eventually become benevolent, within limits, of course.

Because whatever they did with it, this renewed kingdom would ultimately be all about them – their name, their tribe, their reputation, their desires and their comforts. Enslaved to individual egos and infected with a sense of tribal superiority, they fully expected to profit from the reign of this new king. They went before Jesus with more than a sense of destiny, they went before Jesus with a sense of entitlement. Such was their notion of salvation. They had it coming to them! But it was not God’s plan for salvation. They did not know what they did not know.

They did not know what they did not know, and who could blame them for that. It is no sin to not know everything. It is in fact altogether human to not know everything. They knew a lot, but they did not know everything. And the problem then was not that they did not know everything; but that they did not know that they did not know everything. They thought that they knew it all!

Certainly they knew about the covenant promises to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Certainly they knew about the exodus and the conquest of Canaan; how God wrested from the hands of primitive, misguided gentiles and pagans a land for Israel to call its own. Certainly they knew about David – above ALL they knew about David! David and Goliath. David and Saul. David and Jonathan. David and Absalom. David and the Philistines. I have heard Dr. Walter Bruggeman say that David was the engine that drove the imagination of Israel! They knew about David alright, and they were ready for a new David to arrive and set things right.

But it appears they exercised a sort of selective memory. They seemed not to remember the wandering-nomad status of their beloved patriarchs, or the barrenness of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel. They seemed not to remember the drought and famine that drove Israel into Egypt to beg the mercy of the Pharaoh. They seemed not to remember, even though God told them not to forget, the years of subjugation and slavery and oppression that ensued in Egypt, the time of their collective powerlessness, the time they reeled under the rod of the oppressor, the time of their crying out to Yahweh.

They seemed not to remember the forty years of wandering, the forty years during which they suffered indignities and want and danger, the forty years of lost-ness and confusion and not knowing how or where or when. They seemed not to remember the split of Israel into two rival kingdoms, and the decline and final defeat of the last kings of Israel and Judah. They even seemed not to remember the exile in Babylon itself. In other words, they seemed not to remember all the “downs” but only the “ups” of their history with God.

And in one of the great ironies of history, Jesus had just spent the previous three years or so trying to teach and demonstrate to them that the way down has always been the way up! Hear once again this little sample of teachings of Jesus from Matthew's gospel:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”(4:17)

“Blessed are the poor in spirit ... Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you...”(5:3-12)

“I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”(9:13)

“Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens....”(11:29)

“If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, then come, follow me.”(19:21)

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”(16:25)

Then three times –THREE TIMES! – Jesus predicted that when he got to Jerusalem he would be condemned, killed and buried, THEN on the third day he would be raised. Had no one been listening? Are we listening now?

We know what we know. And we know a lot. Our Presbyterian religion has a reputation for being a thinking person's religion. But do we know what we don't know? Do we know that we do not know it all?

Do we know that sooner or later, tragedy comes into every person's life? Do we know that there can be no love without also some heartbreak and loss? Do we know how close even the most powerful and secure person among us is to disaster? Do we know that there are some things from which we simply cannot protect ourselves or our loved ones?

But above all, do we know that when tragedy hits, when heartbreak happens, when loss occurs, that in that very moment, grace is most present; that those very moments are our best opportunities for spiritual growth and advancement in the life of faith? Do we know that we need not be totally devastated by the arrival in our lives of disasters whether economic, medical, political, marital or personal? Do we know that exactly when we are not in control, and especially when we are absolutely out of control, grace happens? Do we know that Jesus Christ has pioneered the way “down” through chaos, conflict, betrayal, oppression, torture, suffering, humiliation and death, so that when, NOT IF, BUT WHEN we go through ours, we will be accompanied throughout all of it by this same Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, who redeems and makes wholeness out of the most broken of situations and people. This is the great, good news! Granted we are not allowed to anticipate what that redemption will look like; we cannot predict what that wholeness will look like; but we will know it when we see it!

My friend and teacher, Father Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest from Albuquerque who must be about 68 years old now, recently said that since he turned 35

he has learned nothing from his successes (and he has had many!); but he says he has learned a great deal from his suffering.

Since suffering is inevitable among us mortal human beings, I bring you on this day great good news, that grace abounds, but that grace abounds most specifically, most recognizably in the moments of our greatest need, in our greatest vulnerability, in our greatest weakness and in most insufferable wounds. Maybe that is what Jesus meant when he said, “Do not fear.” “I have overcome the world.” “I am with you.”

And so our journey “down” through Holy Week begins. The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.