

4-2-21

Good Friday

John 18:3-8, 19-24, 19:1-3, 16-19, 25b-42

His Death and Ours

Most of us have a hard time talking about death. Ours or anyone else's. I'll let Robbie speak for himself, but I've known plenty of doctors who dealt with death all the time who were not very good at it. When we lived in Columbus, we had a woman in our church who had lived alone as a widow for many years. She had two children who lived out of state, but I had never met either of them. She was not well educated and lived very simply on whatever retirement benefits had been left behind when her husband died. She had kept the church nursery for several years, as long as her health allowed, and the Session made sure she had enough Social Security credits to be able to draw a little on top of what he had left behind. She became ill. We all knew she had cancer, but her doctor never told her that. Church folks and I saw to it that she got to her doctor's appointments and treatments. Her illness progressed as they tend to do: she lost her hair; she grew weaker and weaker, got sicker and sicker. She called one of the elders one night saying she was experiencing unbearable pain and asking if he would take her to the emergency room. He called me to see if I would go with him. It was a cold and rainy night when we took her there. This was in the day when you saw your own doctor in the ER instead of someone you had never seen before. The ER staff called her oncologist when we arrived, and he got there shortly. He was not happy. He met with her briefly and then he came out to talk with us.

"You all have got to stop bringing her in here every time she has a headache," he told us. "She's dying, and she probably won't get better until she does. Don't bring her in again."

The elder looked at me as if he expected me to say something, so I did. "Doctor," I told him. "We all know that what

you say is true, but she doesn't. You need to tell her she's dying. She doesn't know. And she needs to hear it from you."

"How could she not know?" he asked. "How could anybody be as sick as she is and not know she's dying."

I swallowed hard and said, "Because you haven't told her!"

"Well, you need to tell her what's going on," he responded. "And don't bring her back in here again. I'll see her in the office when we schedule it. But don't bring her in here again."

I swallowed again and said, "No, sir. That's your job. You go in there and tell her what's going on with her. And we'll take care of her from there."

It wasn't long before someone brought that lady out so we could take her home. She cried a little. So did we. "I knew there was something bad wrong with me," she said. "I wondered why I couldn't get better. Now at least I know. Let's go home."

So we did.

I spent the next morning in the hospital administrator's office explaining why I had been so rude to that oncologist. Once he heard the way I told the story, he decided not to drop me from the hospital's list of volunteer chaplains or ban me from seeing church members when they were there.

I learned from that experience and from others like it that the only way to be able to face death with all of its pain and confusion is to talk about it honestly and openly.

Jesus had tried to do that with his friends, the disciples, and with others who would listen many times. But they simply couldn't understand. The Gospels record several times when Jesus tried to prepare them for the story we are gathered here to remember today. But they just couldn't understand it all.

So, after all these years, it falls to us to tell the story as honestly as we know how.

There is a lot of injustice in this story. Lots of things that should not have happened. Lots of inaccurate accusations and shady deals struck between strange allies. Faithful and unfaithful people alike have argued and debated for years about who killed Jesus and why. We blamed it on the Jews for generations, but

we can't lay it all on them. The Roman government certainly had a role to play in this drama. But this was far more than a government backed execution. When we read the whole story, there are so many times that we want to cry out like kids in an action movie: Watch out! They're going to get you. Somebody do something. We want to somehow help Jesus escape.

But we know better. As painful and confusing as the images of this day are, they are the means of our salvation.

I am often with people just before they roll into surgery, sometimes for life and death kinds of procedures. We pray together just before they roll the patient down the hall, and then friends or family members and I go where they tell us to wait. I am always amazed at how collected you are when that happens. I know the happy shot you get before I get there has something to do with that, but still, knowing what is about to happen makes that a fearful time. There is that split second when you can't help but wonder if you really want to do this or not. In every case I can remember, the patients get rolled down the hallway, as confident as they can be that all will be well.

I can't imagine how Jesus must have felt as he endured the rejection of his friends and the ridicule of those who opposed him. Most of us can't imagine a greater indignity than being slapped in the face or being spit upon. Both of those things, and worse, happened to Jesus. Lies. Deceit. False accusations. They were all a part of what passed for a trial. But never once did he demand justice or threaten retaliation. Imagine having to carry your own cross through the streets of the city, knowing that you would be nailed to it when you arrived at that hill just outside town. The crown of thorns was not nearly as tame as the one on the cross here in the sanctuary. When I ever get to the yard work that waits for me at home, I'll have cat briar to deal with. It pops us everywhere and has huge thorns. That's what I imagine they might have made his crown out of. I know what those cat briar thorns do to my hands and arms. I can imagine what it must have felt like to have them pressed into his forehead. And then the greatest indignity of all: to hang there on public display waiting to

die with people taunting and jeering while you did. He trusted in God; let God deliver him. King of the Jews! Some King this is! Sour wine. Agony. And then he died.

As painful as those images are for us, Jesus faced them and endured them with confidence in God's promise. I don't know how the core of Jesus' nature communicated with the core of God's nature, but somehow God was with him even when he cried out on the cross. I believe that Jesus died. He was as dead as anybody in Hollywood Cemetery when they placed him in that borrowed tomb. But he died confident that he would live again. And that because he would live again, so would we.

He had tried to tell his friends that he would return. But he died with the same kind of apprehension we do. Hopeful, but wondering. Confident.

Because he faced death without fear, so can we. So must we. The ground of our faith is the illogical but wondrous truth of Resurrection. I wish I could offer you all the concrete answers we all want about what Resurrected life will be. But you know I can't. Those who experience it now can't communicate its joy to us. But they know it. And we shall. Because he lives, so shall we. This is the Good News of Good Friday, that death is defeated and that we need not fear it. That God's promise of life everlasting is secure and that it is for us. Even without concrete details, we approach our own death with the same confidence Jesus did. The promise that we will live with God forever without pain, without division, without confusion, but in everlasting joy and light is the ground of our faith. And on this day, it is what sustains us. Thanks be to God. Amen.