

Reflection: It Is Finished

When someone recently asked me what my favorite service in Holy Week was, I was quick to answer, Good Friday – Always Good Friday! Now don't get me wrong, it's not that I don't love Palm Sunday with its procession, palm branches, Hosanna's and choir pieces – believe me, I certainly do. And it's not that I don't love Easter morning with its beautiful lilies, soaring organ and brass, Alleluia's, and let's not forget, Resurrection – it truly is the most beautiful service of the year. But for me, the reason Good Friday is my favorite is because if I never experience the darkness, then the light doesn't seem to hold as much meaning. A candle that's lit after the power goes out helps us find our way in the dark, but a candle lit in a bright room, even though it may look lovely, just doesn't seem to hold the same meaning and importance.

Once a year our worship service takes us to a shadowy, painful, and miserable place – to an utterly shameful execution. Once a year, we peer into the abyss and we remember those whose suffering was mirrored on the cross – the oppressed, the dying, the unjustly accused, the deserted, and the hopeless. And once a year, in darkness we leave our place of worship heavy-hearted, pondering in silence.

It is finished. How do you hear these final words of Jesus tonight? Is his voice exhausted and trembling as he walks through the dark doorway of death? Is there relief in his words as he realizes the long ordeal of his arrest, torture, and execution on the brutal cross are finally over? Is there defiance in his words – a man who even while being executed is so in control of his fate that it is, he, not the cross or his crucifiers, that chooses when it is finished and when he will give up his spirit? There's so much in these three words.

It is finished. I wonder, how those words must have sounded to Jesus' disciples? What must they have thought when they heard Jesus declare it was all over? Because nothing could have prepared them for what happened that day — the torture, the emptiness, the crucifixion. Nothing could have prepared them for the despair and sorrow they must have felt in watching the man they had followed and loved, only to be crucified so unceremoniously by the Roman government.

But all of us – we've read the final pages of the story. We know how it turns out. We know that resurrection is just around the corner and the power of death will hold its sting for only a short time longer. We're cheaters, in a way, strolling through the darkness of the crucifixion knowing that an Easter sunrise is not far away.

But the disciples don't know the end of the story. Rather they're right in the middle of it, in the middle of a crisis, the loss of all hope and meaning, the darkest night of the soul. For them, in that moment, the cross was not exceptional. It was all too ordinary. Rome had crucified countless people just like Jesus, people convicted as criminals. For the disciples, this was all a tragic collapse of justice about which they were helpless to do anything.

The cross, for the disciples, wasn't about salvation or forgiveness like it is for us today. Instead, the cross, on that dark Friday, represented a brutal and profound failure. All they knew was that Jesus — the Messiah, the Savior, the Lord — was dead. And there on the cross, with his last breath, Jesus declared it finished, done, over, completed. Mission accomplished.

It is finished? What did he mean, "It is finished?" Of course, it wasn't finished! Look around! The world was a wreck, a mess of violence, hate, oppression and despair. It is finished? How in the world can you, who preached the coming of God's kingdom, look down from the cross and say that? **It is finished???**
BUT THE KING IS DEAD!

Tonight we may find ourselves looking around at our current world and all we can see is so much tragedy: the loss of our routines, the loss of our connectedness, the uncertainty, the sickness and death of

so many people as a result of the coronavirus – all piled on top of our own questions, our own doubt, and our own loss of faith. What are we to do, when in our own lives we hear the phrase, “It is finished” from the lips of Jesus even as we look around and see so much unfinished?

For me, this is the question that haunts Good Friday. What do we do when things fall apart, and we’ve lost all meaning or hope for whatever comes next? When we’re separated from our family and friends, when someone we love receives a terminal diagnosis, when the abuse spirals out of control, when the struggles with our mental health seem overwhelming, when a job is lost and there isn’t enough money to pay the bills or buy groceries, when a relationship fails, or when it feels like our prayers aren’t being answered quick enough.

Because this is exactly where the disciples find themselves when Jesus is crucified. And, as Christians, we, too, at some point in our lives will find ourselves at the foot of the cross, staring up at our Lord who is dead and wondering what in God’s name we’re to do next? What do we do when our Savior dies, and darkness covers the land? Is it really finished?

By the time Jesus’ lifeless body is taken down from the cross, none of the disciples can be found. They, who have openly followed Jesus around the Judean countryside and into Jerusalem, now shrink, crushed and defeated, into the shadows of grief and despair. They cannot handle or comprehend, it seems, the reality of the crucifixion and the quiet trauma of Jesus’ burial.

So, what then are we to do, as followers of Jesus, when everything seems to be falling apart and it feels like we’re forsaken and finished? Do we run from the hopelessness? Maybe all that’s left for us to do is dwell in the darkness and know that it’s okay to cry out to God...just as Jesus did, and then trust that God will hear our fear, our frustration, and our fragility. Amen.