

## **Good Friday: April 7, 2023**

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Hebrews 10:16-25

John 18:1-19:42

Psalm 22

**The Rev. Nat Johnson**

In their final shared meal together, Jesus set before his disciples an example. All that he had taught them, all the signs he performed, are founded on this one new command – to love as they have been loved: to wash one another's feet, to satisfy one another's hunger, to ease one another's burdens. This is how others will know that they are his disciples. He prayed that their love would bind them into the oneness of divine communion. He prayed that this oneness would protect them when the love that sets them apart draws criticism, hostility, and even persecution.

Jesus' words rang in the disciples' ears as they followed him across the Kidron Valley to a garden. Here, he met his betrayer and the detachment of soldiers and temple guards brought along to arrest him. But Jesus doesn't wait for the betrayer's kiss. He turned himself in and negotiated the release of his companions. Filled with fear and adrenaline, Peter drew his sword, thinking "this is the moment, this is when it all comes to a head, and we begin the revolution." Once again, Peter found himself being rebuked. "Am I not to drink from the cup of the One who sent me?" Jesus asked. No amount of violence or force could thwart the divine plan, which was bigger than any human agent. If life was to be stitched back into death, he must finish what he came to do: defeat the death-dealing powers and principalities of this world by bringing new and abundant life.

Peter and the others understood that everything Jesus taught and did threatened those powers and principalities. Jesus challenged the systems and greed that perpetuated violence as power. The Jerusalem elite were afraid. They feared what Jesus might incite with his teaching, they feared the unknown motivations behind his disciples' loyalty. They feared his popularity, not out of jealousy but out of self-protection: how easy would it be for Jesus to bid his followers to revolt and how swift and violent would Roman respond? "Yes," they thought, "it would be better that he die than the whole force of Rome descend upon their city, their temple, their way of life and faith."

So the Jerusalem elite colluded with Roman power to strike down what they feared. Jesus was arrested, taken to the home of the high priest, and questioned about his teaching and his disciples. He was accused of plotting an insurrection. But Jesus reminded them that he taught openly in the temple, in the synagogues, and among the people. He has been no secret mission and he had established no secret society. "Ask those who were there," Jesus challenges them.

Out in the courtyard, Peter kept his head down, trying to hear and see without giving himself away. Confusion engulfed his heart as Jesus' words of rebuke rang in his ears. Why wouldn't Jesus resist? How could he defeat the powers and principalities that oppress God's people if Jesus just gives up? "Aren't you one of his companions?" The question barely registered as he instinctively cried out, "I don't know him!" Twice more he is asked, twice more he denied Jesus. And then the rooster crowed.

On trumped up charges, Jesus was taken to the seat of Roman power in Jerusalem. "Are you who they say you are?" Pilate asked him. "My kingdom is not from this world," Jesus answered him. "My reign is different; it is not based on military might or coercion or domination. My peace is not fragile, and my power doesn't manipulate or control. My entire life, the work I've done, the reign of God that I've proclaimed and embodied, has been about testifying to this truth." For Pilate, truth was whatever kept the balance of power in his favor and alleviated his fear of losing control. "Yes," thought Pilate, "it's better that he die than dealing with an uprising." And at noon, Jesus was handed over to be crucified.

Jesus had warned his disciples that this would happen. He knew that completing the work he was given to do would lead to this moment. This was no sacrifice, this was the Word of God, in whom all things were made; the source of life that enlightens all people demonstrating the radical solidarity of God with the oppressed and the suffering. His death was not to appease the wrath of God but to demonstrate the utter depth to which God would go to reject all forms of oppressive violence in the world. All of his teachings, all of his acts of healing, all of the signs he performed were meant as a demonstration of this divine love and its aim of bringing restoration and life to all. His was a revelation that God refuses to leave us in the shadows of human existence. The cross would stand not as a sign of divine violence but as an indictment against the world's "sharp violence that kills what it fears."

So many of his disciples had fled, fearing their own lives were in danger, confused about what was happening and why. But there were some who followed all the way to the Place of the Skull, who stood at the foot of the cross, bearing the incomprehensible burden of grief, defeat, and loss. Perhaps in their heart they too questioned whether Jesus would call upon the power of God to free himself from nails that bound him to the tree. It's easy to imagine why the others fled, the fear that disabled them from bearing witness to the pain and agony of this moment. It's a fear that still rests in our humanness, that pushes against us and propels us out of the place of suffering. We despise the discomfort of unsolvable pain and so we rush through it as we grasp for those feelings of warmth and life and joy.

"Woman, here is your son; beloved, here is your mother." From the place of suffering, Jesus looked down and once again showed them that love was the heartbeat of life. "Love one another," he had told them, "as I have loved you." Only love could fill the depths of sorrow, anguish, and grief that enveloped the disciples at the foot of the cross. "Having loved his own, he loved them to the end," and he cried out, "It is finished."

The finality of Jesus' statement presses in. As Easter people, it is easy to jump ahead in our story, to arrive too soon at the hope of resurrection, all in an attempt to skip the uncomfortable parts of our shared story and faith. On this Good Friday, however, we are invited into the fear and confusion of the disciples who scattered. We are invited into the heartache of a mother watching her son suffer and die. We are invited into the emptiness of loss and unfulfilled expectations. Moving too quickly to the hope of new life renders our hope shallow and unstable. Today, as we look upon the empty cross, we are invited to sit in the discomfort of longing, because it is only through longing that our hope is deepened and given shape.