

Message for Good Friday
Friday, March 30, 2018
NE Ministerium/St. Mary Anne's Episcopal Church
Rev. Dr. Drew M. Christian

Many of you have seen Jesus' crucifixion depicted in the movie, "*The Passion of the Christ*." It is a depiction that is shockingly brutal and heart wrenching to watch. It is also very accurate.

Listen to a medical doctor's physical description of the crucifixion. Just lower your heads...close your eyes...and focus solely on listening...Visualize in your mind the events as I describe them...

The first part of the crucifixion process usually began with the person being stripped of their clothing so that they may be physically weakened by intense beatings and whippings. These whippings were often done with a scourge, a whip made of leather with chips of bone woven into its end. With every lashing, every strike, the flesh of the victim is literally torn away. Special attention is paid to the victims back and shoulders.

After this viciously agonizing punishment, the victim is either led to the cross or is forced to drag or carry the cross to the designated crucifixion location. The cross is placed on the ground and the exhausted man is quickly thrown backwards with his shoulders against the wood. The legionnaire feels the depression at the front of the wrist. He drives a heavy, square wrought-iron nail through the wrist and deep into the wood. Quickly he moves to the other side and repeats the action, being careful not to pull the arms too tightly, but to allow some flex and movement. The cross is then lifted into place. The left foot is pressed backward against the right foot, and with both feet extended, toes down, a nail is driven through the arch of each, leaving the knees flexed. The victim is now crucified. As he slowly sags down with more weight on the nails in the wrists, excruciating, fiery pain shoots along the fingers and up the arms to explode in the brain—the nails in the wrists are putting pressure on the median nerves. As he pushes himself upward to avoid this stretching torment, he places the full weight on the nail through

his feet. Again, he feels the searing agony of the nail tearing through the nerves between the bones of his feet.

As the arms fatigue, cramps sweep through the muscles, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push himself upward to breath. Air can be drawn into the lungs but not exhaled. He fights to raise himself in order to get even one small breath. Finally, carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and the blood stream, and the cramps partially subside. Spasmodically he is able to push himself upward to exhale and bring in life-giving oxygen. Hours of limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint-rending cramps, intermittent partial asphyxiation, searing pain as tissue is torn from his lacerated back as he moves up and down against the rough timber.

Then another agony begins: a deep, crushing pain deep in his chest as the pericardium slowly fills with fluid and begins to compress the heart. It is now almost over – the loss of tissue fluids has reached a critical level – the compressed heart is struggling to pump heavy, thick, sluggish blood into the tissues – the tortured lungs are making a frantic effort to gasp in small gulps of air. He can feel the chill of death creeping through his tissues...Finally, he can allow his body to die.

All this the Bible records in Mark 15:24 with these four simple words, “*And they crucified Him.*”

The night before Jesus was crucified, he knelt down in the garden of Gethsemane and he prayed. He knew what awaited him. The pain...the suffering...the gulping for air...the chill of death creeping through his tissues...He knew. For a moment, Jesus was afraid...he asked his Father in heaven...”*Is there another way?*” “*Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will, not mine.*” God spoke to Jesus...a soft and simple...”*No*”...”*No, there is no other way...*”

Jesus accepts the answer. He knows he could still turn away...walk away...but he would be leaving us...leaving you and I in our sin for all eternity...so Jesus unclenches his fist...and in that moment chooses to go to the cross...

Max Lucado describes that moment in the garden...

“The battle is won. You may have thought it was won on Golgotha. It wasn’t. You may have thought the sign of victory is the empty tomb. It isn’t. The final battle is won in Gethsemane. And sign of conquest is Jesus at peace in the olive trees. For it was in the garden that he made the decision. He would rather go to hell for you than go to heaven without you.”

Jesus went to the cross. *“And they crucified Him.”* And having been beaten...having carried his cross through the streets of Jerusalem...having had nails hammered through his hands and feet...feeling excruciating pain...his first words were...

“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

What wondrous love is this?

Paul writes, in Ephesians 1:7-8, *“For by the blood of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven. How great is the grace of God, which he gave to us in such large measure.”*

Later, in his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul writes, *“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, to that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”*

What wondrous love is this?

How can we, like Paul pleads, possibly comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of such love, for it truly surpasses knowledge...

In his short story, *“The Capitol of the World,”* Ernest Hemingway tells the story of a Spanish father and his teenage son. The relationship between this father and son became strained and eventually shattered. When the rebellious son – whose name was Paco, a common Spanish name – ran away from home, his father began a long and arduous search to find him. As a last resort, the exhausted father placed an ad in a Madrid newspaper, hoping that his son would see the ad and respond to it. The ad read, *“Dear Paco, Please meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. Love,*

Father.” As Hemingway tells the story, the next day at noon, in front of the newspaper office, there were 800 Pacos, all seeking forgiveness from their fathers.

God knows we are slow to comprehend...that we often run away...become lost...

Therefore, Our Father in heaven has written sixty-six of His letters; they have been put in a book...other letters can be read on the sunsets...others in the face of a newborn...still others in the love of a friend...all point to the greatest letter of all which was in the shape of a cross...yet, at times His letters collect dust and go unread...or His letters go unnoticed as we hurry from place to place, focused on ourselves and our problems...Yet God continues to place an ad in the newspapers of our lives... saying to us, “*Please meet me...All is forgiven...Love, your Father.*”

Francis Thompson coined the phrase *The Hound of Heaven*. Thompson’s early life was one of one dead end after another. Early in his life he studied to be a priest but quit. He then began to study medicine and failed. Thompson joined the military, but after three days was sent home and declared unfit for service. Thompson’s life continued in a downward spiral until a Christian missionary found him in an opium den on London’s eastside. The missionary saw potential in Francis Thompson. He noticed that Thompson had a gift for writing poetry.

This missionary told Thompson about Christ and Thompson opened his heart to God. In the poem, *The Hound of Heaven*, Thompson describes his flight from God, only to be found by the Lord...

“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways. Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears I hid from Him, and under running laughter, Up vistaed hopes, I sped; And shot precipitated Down Titanic glooms of chasmed fears, From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.”

God pursues and pursues and pursues us with His grace.

You and I must understand that there is a great chasm between God...who is holy and perfect, and man, even though we are created in God’s image, who

are far from perfect...we are stained with sin...we say it all the time, "*Nobody's perfect.*" Just by God's very nature, that which is not holy and perfect cannot come into contact with Him. Yet God provided a way...God has pursued us since the garden...God sent His Son, Jesus Christ who paid the price for our sins...took our imperfections upon Himself, making us pure and holy in God's eyes...that we may enter in God's presence.

God loves us just as we are not for how good or holy we can be. Even when we feel unacceptable, God accepts us. Even when we fail God, God forgives us and is ready to give us another chance. Even when we see no future for ourselves, God prepares a way, opening the future in ways we cannot imagine. All we need to do is accept it...accept this gift...the endless pursuit... All we need to do is stop running, ask for forgiveness for the things we have done or failed to do...

We have to stop running from "*The Hound of Heaven*" and allow Him to catch us...accepting His love for us...a love shown by His Son...who took the nails, who wore our sins, who cried out to His Father, "*Father, Forgive them.*"

God has never given up and will never give up on the relationship...He keeps writing you...He keeps writing your neighbors, your friends, your family...yet, so many, including us, at times refuse to reply, refuse to read, refuse to hear the words,

"Father, forgive them...for they know not what they do."

So many letters...I pray we read them...I pray we allow those letters to lead us back to a dark, Friday night...

Lead us back to a letter written in red...a love so deep...forgiveness unconditional...a message to be shouted to our neighbors...

And when we find ourselves there...at the cross...May we kneel in awe at such grace...