

Title: Come to the Cross
Date: 4/15/2022 (Good Friday)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 7pm service (Hybrid)
Readings: [Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#); [Hebrews 10:16-25](#); [John 18:1-19:42](#); [Psalm 22](#)
Video Link: https://youtu.be/F45y_POj9ow?t=2021

Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy Immortal One.
Have mercy upon us.¹

Amen.

As I mentioned on Sunday, the services of Holy Week are designed to immerse us and all our senses in the final week of Jesus' life. Some version of Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the vigil of Easter existed at least as far back as fourth century. They were found in the travel diary of Egeria, a nun from Western Europe who went to the Holy Land from 381-384 AD for a three-year pilgrimage.² Each of these services were celebrated at the church, or in some cases, churches, built to commemorate these events.

Throughout Holy Week we recall these events, as the early Christians did, not just in our minds and our hearts but with our bodies. On Sunday we waved palm branches in a procession to mark Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. Last night we knelt and washed one another's feet and ate the bread and drank the wine in remembrance of Jesus. Tonight, we are invited to the cross.

This is an interesting exercise because we see the cross behind the altar every Sunday, and we see the giant cross outside every time we park in the parking lot. It's not as if the cross is something we only bring out once a year. In Texas, more than any other place I've lived, the cross is everywhere, printed on signs, worn on clothing, and sold in stores.

So, what does it mean to come to the cross when the cross is everywhere?

Let's put ourselves into the sandals of those fourth century Christians and meditate on Egeria's account of Good Friday.

Close your eyes and picture this.

"[A] chair is placed for the bishop in Golgotha (Peggy: the spot we just heard about in the Passion) behind the Cross, which is now standing; the bishop duly takes his seat in the chair, and a table covered with a linen cloth is placed before him; the deacons stand round the table, and a silver-gilt casket is brought in which is the holy wood of the Cross. The casket is opened and (the wood) is taken out, and both the wood of the Cross and the title (Peggy: the sign referring to Jesus as the king of the Judeans) are placed upon the table.

2. Now, when it has been put upon the table, the bishop, as he sits, holds the extremities of the sacred wood firmly in his hands, while the deacons who stand around guard it. It

is guarded thus because the custom is that the people, both faithful and catechumens (Peggy: those who have been preparing for baptism), come one by one and, bowing down at the table, kiss the sacred wood and pass through...

3. [And] as all the people pass by one by one, all bowing themselves, they touch the Cross and the title, first with their foreheads and then with their eyes; then they kiss the Cross and pass through, but none lays his hand upon it to touch it.³

What did this meditation bring to mind for you?

For me, the actions of bowing to the cross and kissing the fragments bring to mind the woman who anointed Jesus' feet in the gospel according to Luke.

“And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that [Jesus] was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment” (Lk 7:37-38). His host, Simon the Pharisee, was scandalized that Jesus would let a woman, a sinner no less, touch him like this. But Jesus helped him see that because “her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love” (Lk 7:48).

She wept, but she did not wail and cover herself in sackcloth and ashes as people once did. Jesus did not expect her to hide out of shame, to perform repentance, as Simon did. We don't know what her sins were. We don't even know if she sinned more than Simon or if her sins were any worse than his. However, by her extravagant response we see how much she personally felt the need to be forgiven, and by the love she showed, we can see how deeply she felt the love of God, as shown through Jesus.

Since the time of Luke, since the time of Egeria, the cross and Jesus' death on the cross has taken on so many meanings. The cross has brought people together, and it has driven them apart. For some, it is a symbol of love, and for others it has been used against them as a symbol of hate. If you are wondering why we replaced the more familiar term “Jews” with “Judeans” in today's Passion, there's an explanation at the end of today's bulletin. Again, for some it's a symbol of love, for other's it has been used against them. For some, it is a sign of liberation, and for others, it has been used to justify and glorify their suffering in this lifetime.

Sometimes, Jesus' death on the cross brings up more questions than it provides answers.

What does it mean that he died for our sins?
Did God use him as a scapegoat or did we?

A priest⁴ who taught preaching once told me that the question every sermon needs to answer is,

“What difference did Jesus make?”

There are other places where we can get together for food and interesting conversations and do good things for the world. There are other places where we can experience the awesome power of God. Jesus is what makes us different from a private club or nonprofit or a campground.

Tonight, for the second night in a row, we will depart the service in silence. On Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, there is no triumph. There is no celebration. There is no closure. There is just the cross.

For the woman in Luke, encountering Jesus and his forgiveness of her sins led her to this extravagant act of great love. As you leave, I invite you to ponder these questions:

What is the difference Jesus has made in your life?

How will contemplating the cross, contemplating the death of Jesus, change the way you **live**?

Amen.

¹ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/trisagion/>

² <https://users.ox.ac.uk/~mikef/durham/egetra.html>

³ <https://users.ox.ac.uk/~mikef/durham/egelat.html#ch37>

⁴ Thank you, Rev. Julie Kelsey!