

## Easter Sermon – April 2020 – “Something You Can Hold Onto”

### Scripture Readings:

Exodus 12:13: And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you.

Luke 22: 39-44: Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives and his disciples followed him. On reaching the place, he said to them, “Pray that you will not fall into temptation. He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, “Father if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.” An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

John 11: 25-26: Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”

1 Peter 1:3: Praise be to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

Luke: 24:6-7: He is not here; he has risen!”

What a strange time we are in these days and this has to qualify as the most unusual Holy Week I’ve ever experienced! We may come from various religious or faith backgrounds or not that type of background at all but we are sharing this Holy Week together and seeking the hope that it represents.

Those of us who are Jewish and celebrate the Passover with Seder meals this week reworked this holiday tradition to be safer and all of us have made and are sustaining major adjustments in our lives to be safe and protect our health and the health of others the best we can. There is an eerie resemblance of what we are experiencing today in the midst of a pandemic to what happened to the people of Israel so long ago as they were slaves in bondage to the Egyptians. They had lives of extremely hard labor and duress, and ten plagues were visited upon them to induce the Egyptians to free the Israelites from their bondage. The Israelites were to apply blood to their doorposts so that when the Angel of Death passed over and took the Egyptians’ firstborn, that their firstborn children would be spared and saved. And we are all stressed and worried and anxious about ourselves and our loved ones, hoping that we will all be “passed over” with this virus. We are deeply concerned and rightfully so. As N.T. Wright said in a New York Times article recently, “This is a stillness, not of rest, but of poised, anxious sorrow.”

As we are walking through Holy Week, we have a variety of images that play through our minds. Last Sunday was Palm Sunday and on that day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey to the waving of palm fronds and to the shouts of Hosanna by the crowds lined on either side of the road. “Hosanna to the King of Kings!” they yelled and they threw their coats on the ground in honor of his arrival. What a joyous celebratory image!

On Maundy Thursday we observe Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. Engaging in physical touch, in service, in ministering to the needs of those with dusty sandals and likely calloused, worn down feet. Some of us are walking with that today and are in need of someone washing our feet. At one of the Stand Down events where many homeless people and veterans come for a big day of service providers

all gathered under one roof once a year to address all the needs of homeless veterans, I once volunteered at a footwashing station. I ended up just carrying plastic tubs of water but as I watched others wash the feet of veterans it reminded me then and again now that Jesus was willing to engage in the grime, the dust, be with the corns and callouses and bunions, tenderly tending to his beloved disciples – to their feet and their needs. I have in my imagination how he likely tended to their worries and concerns and listened much as my hairdresser or your barber might chat with you during a trim.

On Good Friday, the trial has occurred, Jesus has been condemned, the other criminal has been freed and Jesus is headed to the cross of crucifixion. The hosannas and joyful exclamations are long gone and a distant memory. This is where our greatest discomfort enters in as we watch the horrific destruction of Jesus' body through torture and ridicule. It's so very tempting to turn away, yet we must grasp the enormity of his love that was so well demonstrated in the taking of his life on the cross. This was the deepest, most unimaginable love, poured out from his broken body, in the most well-written love letter ever composed.

And we know from the Scripture I read above that Jesus struggled with what was happening to him. Even the Son of God asked if the cup of suffering could be removed. While our suffering in the midst of this pandemic and all the normal non-pandemic bad things that happen doesn't approximate that of torture and crucifixion, we still feel the suffering around us and we have tasted of sorrow with more likely to come. Whether we have simply suffered the loss of our "normal" from social distancing limitations or have someone sick in our family or friend group or have lost one of our beloved ones to this heartless disease, our suffering is legit. And I find it comforting to have faith in a Son of God who questioned his own suffering and desired escape. This is One I can relate to and be real with, one who isn't way above us, detached, but one who sits with us in trying times of turmoil and terror.

N.T. Wright also says that maybe what we need more than a rational answer to why is this disease happening or a romantic answer to be given a sigh of relief – perhaps what we need more than either is to recover the biblical tradition of lament. Lament is what happens when people ask "Why?" and don't get an answer. It's where we get to when we move beyond our self-centered worry about our sins and failings and look more broadly at the suffering of the world. It's bad enough facing a pandemic in New York City or London, but what about a crowded refugee camp on a Greek Island? What about Gaza? Or South Sudan? It's all the more terrifying because Jesus said in his agony on the cross "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" If the Son of God is entitled to lament and not just put a bow on it all, certainly our lament is justified and more importantly, understood and accepted by our God.

We lost a beloved songwriter, John Prine, to Covid-19 complications this week and it has broken my heart to lose one so gifted with words that describe our human condition. My family gathered last night to sing together one of his most well-known songs, Angel from Montgomery. The song lyrics say "Make me an angel that flies from Montgomery, make me a poster of an old rodeo. Just give me something that I can hold onto. To believe in this living is just a hard way to go."

This living that we've experienced over the past month or so has been a hard way to go. An invisible virus that can seize a body and inflict so much damage. Perhaps more than any other time, to believe in this living is just a hard way to go. We are all lamenting "just give me something that I can hold onto." I will not put a shiny bow on what we are going through or minimize the suffering around us.

And yet, there is another reality. The Easter story ends not with the revolutionary Son of God who threatened the social and political order held captive in the tomb. The women went to find Jesus' body the morning after his death to anoint his body with spices, but he is in absentia. He is not there. Death with its most powerful vices was unable to conquer love or hope in the end game. In the movie, "The Shawshank Redemption" Red played by Morgan Freeman warns his prison cellmate Andy that "hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane" but Andy does escape his cell and Red sees that hope is something you build and nurture and work to bring into fruition. Hope is seeing clearly what is happening and working to overcome evil with the love of God, which death cannot touch or overpower.

So here's a little that I want to share with you for giving you something that you can hold onto. Here is Passover and Easter power unleashed in the love of God for you, God's beloved child. Here are the other stories that won't make the news like Covid-19, but speak of other realities that give us hope.

The next time you hear of someone suspected of having Covid -19, I want you to think about Miss Vanola, who lived in our Spanish Cove Senior Housing for 15 years before she passed away at the age of 92 last month. I want you to think about her life in stable housing, supported with service coordination and an affordable housing rent that made her life secure and good. She messed with her fellow tenants by telling them she was getting married February 30<sup>th</sup>. She moved into Spanish Cove when it first opened in 2005 and I called her the "Mayor of Spanish Cove." I'm so saddened by her death but I know that her life was full of positive change because of VOA's services. This was her resurrection story.

The next time you hear of someone diagnosed with Covid-19, I want you to think of Rickey Green who celebrates this month 14 years of sober living with his beautiful family. I want you to picture him changing from a 115 pound addict making and selling meth and other illegal drugs with his cousins to becoming a healthy and influential member of his community, a former felon pardoned by the governor who then was able to pass a background check and coaches his son's sports team. I preached about Rickey a year ago for the Easter sermon and afterward one of the men approached me and said he's Rickey's cousin and he was one of those people doing horrible things, but he said, "Now I'm in treatment and I'm coming out of the madness. VOA has saved my life." This was his resurrection story.

The next time you hear of someone passing away from Covid-19, I want you to envision their resurrection story as they rest in the loving arms of the God who loves them more than anyone. I want you to be able to celebrate their life and the positive change they experienced, maybe because of something you said or did, and I want you to picture it clearly in your mind's eye. Love remains.

John Prine said, "Just give me something that I can hold on to" and today I'm holding on to many things: that Jesus set his face with determination to head into Jerusalem perhaps with foreboding or even full knowledge of what was to come...I'm holding on to the comfort that comes with knowing that even Jesus could lament, could ask why without receiving easy answers, could struggle with the hard questions...I'm holding onto the beauty I see in what you are doing, whether you are a VOA employee faithfully doing what you can to love and serve, near or from a distance, or whether you are a person we serve, trying very hard to rise about normal challenges and the struggle we are all sharing in together.

The governor in Kentucky says every day at 5pm, "We will get through this and we will get through it together." In the Bible, Deuteronomy 31:6 says "Do not be afraid or terrified...for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you or forsake you." And that is something that you can hold on to.

