



## ALL SAINTS CHURCH

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

### **By His Wounds We Are Healed**

A meditation by the Rev. Susan Russell

April 10, 2009 - Good Friday

So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek.

Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfill what the scripture says,

*"They divided my clothes among themselves,  
and for my clothing they cast lots."*

And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother."

And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

They stood at the foot of the cross knowing that the end was near. The life -- the promise -- the light that shone so brightly in the Jesus they knew as son, teacher, leader and friend was about to be extinguished. All that would remain of the rabbi from Nazareth was a broken body and the broken dreams of his scattered followers. Only the women and the beloved disciple remained. The Kingdom he proclaimed had not come. The powerful remained powerful: the oppressed remain oppressed -- and where there had been hope there is only despair.

And yet we call this Friday “Good.” That is at least in part because even as we stand together at the foot of the cross this afternoon we know that Easter’s a’comin’. The lilies may be offstage and the Peeps still in their plastic wrap, but pretty soon we’ll be back here again – with a whole lot more people – singing “Alleluia, Alleluia!” – celebrating the mystery of faith in a Eucharistic Prayer that proclaims, “*By his blood he reconciled us; by his wounds we are healed.*”

“By his wounds we are healed.” What exactly does that mean, anyway? How does what happened on a hill in Palestine in the first century have anything to do with what’s happening in Pasadena in the 21<sup>st</sup>? What are we reconciled *to* by his blood? *How* are we healed by his wounds?

There’s one answer to those questions that goes something like this – [with thanks to James Alison]: *God created the world and all was well. The first human beings lived in paradise until the day they broke the one commandment God had given them God was very angry and threw them out of paradise. Their descendents kept on being disobedient and God kept on being angry.*

*God was in a quandary. Part of him wanted to be merciful, but he could not deny that he was also just, and the continued sin was an affront to his very honor. And the problem was that human beings could never make up for what they had done. They just didn’t have it in them. And yet they had to do something.*

*So God decided to send his Son into the world as a human being. As a human being he could pay the price of sin, but since he was also God, that payment would be eternal. It would be enough to appease God’s anger. So Jesus died for our sins, took upon himself the price that we couldn’t pay and God wiped the slate clean. Now if any human being agrees to have their sins covered by the blood of Jesus, they are saved.<sup>1</sup>*

That’s one answer – one way of telling the story of how “by his wounds we are healed.”

Ant it is a way of telling the story has dominated in the church for almost 1,000 years. It has been *so* dominant that many Christians cannot imagine there is any other way of telling the story. But here’s a **Good Friday News Flash**: It is *not* the only way to understand the words “*By his wounds we are healed.*”

In fact, for the first 1,000 years of the church’s life there was a *different* way of telling the story dominated Christian theology – a different answer to the question. And the answer started with Jesus. And that answer goes like this:

When Jesus talked about his death he used this parable: *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* For those first thousand years of the church’s life, Jesus’ death and resurrection were primarily about death, not about sin. Jesus died and then rose victorious from the grave.

The main story line (for the first 1000 of Christian faith) was not “Jesus died for our

sins,” but “Jesus died to destroy the power of death.” After Jesus’ death and resurrection, humankind could live as if death were not. They could live healed from the fear of death.

There was no angry God; no atoning sacrifice. Instead there was the paradigmatic example of the One who loved us enough to become one of us not *only* to show us how to love one another but who loved us enough to die in order to rise again to heal us of our amnesia about the love of God so great that it transcends death. Even death on a cross.

*“By his wounds we are healed.”*

Jesus heals us because Jesus saves us from our fear. In penetrating the boundary between life and death Jesus assures us that the crossing over at the end of this earthly life is to something very real. With that assurance, Jesus saves us from the fear of death that is *such* an existential fear that it can paralyze us into trying to control the bits of life we can wrap our hands around rather than letting go to receive the abundance of life God would have us receive. His resurrection tells us that we need not live our life in fear of that crossing over and sets us free. And free from that fear we ARE liberated to embrace the abundant life that God has made known to us in Jesus. Jesus saves us from worrying so much about getting to heaven that we’re too paralyzed by fear to get busy helping to bring heaven to earth.

*“By his wounds we are healed.”*

We are healed because more important than the death Jesus died was the life Jesus lived – a life so in alignment with God’s will – God’s love – that he was “obedient even unto death.”

Not obedient to a vengeful God who sent Jesus as a blood sacrifice – to a death that was the inevitable result of humanity’s abject sinfulness for which we should still wallow in guilt and shame.

Rather, what is good about Good Friday is that Jesus was obedient to the love of a God so great that it enabled him to transcend the FEAR of death as he walked the way of the cross – as he chose to drink the cup he had been given even as he questioned up until the very last moment whether there wasn’t another way to accomplish the work he had been given to do.

I am always grateful for my friend, mentor and brother-priest Michael Hopkins – but this week I was *especially* grateful for him because his sermon last week provided not only my “Good Friday News Flash” but included this great summary of the Good News of Good Friday:

*Jesus freely gave himself up to death and destroyed it once and for all. That means you and I don’t have to be afraid of death and part of that not-being-afraid is knowing ourselves to be forgiven.*

*I hope you can see what a different way of telling the story that is from the crucifixion as satisfying the vengeance of an angry God. Of course you can find pieces of Scripture that support that way of telling the story, but the alternative way has as*

*much support in Scripture -- as well as the thinking of the early church.*

*At the end of the day, we get to decide which lens to use to read the story. And I choose to use the “victory over death” lens rather than the “satisfying the vengeance of God” lens.*

And so do I. And so may you. Or not. That’s the beauty of being an Anglican – or at least that has *historically* been the beauty of being an Anglican. Remember – whoever you are and wherever you find yourself on your journey of faith, there is a place for you here. Here at the foot of this cross this Good Friday. Here at the altar rail on Easter Sunday. Here in the life and work and witness of All Saints Church.

The witness we have to offer the world – the witness we call turning the human race into the human family -- has nothing to do with some doctrinal litmus test. It has nothing to do with which story *you* choose to claim the power of cross in your own life and journey. Instead, it has everything to do with what Frederick Buechner names as "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." It has to do with **being** the Body of Christ in the world.

The Good News this Good Friday is that we follow the One who proclaimed a love too radical, too inclusive, too dangerous to the status quo to survive without a struggle -- then or now. It is an amazing irony that the very Jesus who gave his life to show us how to love each other has had that message of reconciliation hijacked by those who would make his kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven about the Dictates of Doctrine rather than about the Lordship of Love.

The Good News this Good Friday is we stand at the foot of the cross *knowing* that the way of the cross part of the journey – not the destination. The destination is the resurrection – and our passport is an empty tomb that frees us to live lives of perfect freedom: free from the fear of death. Without the cross, the resurrection couldn’t have happened. *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* But because it did – because of the Good News of this Good Friday -- we are freed to be fully alive by the power of the resurrection – healed, whole and liberated in this life and the next.

*“By his wounds we are healed.”*

I’ll close with a story – a story I’ve told before but bears retelling as we each in our claim our own way of telling the story of God’s liberating love:

*When my son Jamie was in kindergarten the week right before Easter was “Letter E” week and all the children had drawn pictures of an “E” word – pictures of Easter. I remember looking at the bulletin board on the wall where twenty pictures Easter were proudly displayed -- of a green hill with three crosses ... some with flowers, a few with trespassing Easter bunnies ... nineteen of them alike but different in their best kindergarten way ... and then there was the twentieth. Down in the far, right hand corner ... the one without a cross or even a bunny in sight ... the one mostly green with a chunk of gray and a splash of yellow ... the one that said “Jamie Russell on it.” I know enough now to know that*

*the right question to have asked would have been “Tell me about your picture, honey” – but I was a first-time mom and said instead (I’m embarrassed to admit) “I thought you were supposed to draw a picture of Easter, honey.” And he looked at me with a five-year-old version of ill-disguised distain and said to me, “It IS a picture of Easter, Mom. Easter isn’t about crosses – it’s about the empty tomb.” And then I could see it – the green hill, the gray stone rolled away from it, the light coming out from it ... Christ was risen, indeed—once I recognized the resurrection!*

My prayer this Good Friday is that we not only be given the grace to receive the healing liberating power of the cross on our journey – but that we be given the grace to *recognize* the resurrection that is our destination whenever and wherever we see it. And may the God who gives the gift of living lives healed of the fear of death also give us also give us the grace to share that life abundant with the whole human family.

Amen.

## PRAYERS

O God, you have made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, and sent your blessed Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near. Grant that people everywhere may seek after you and find you; pour out your Spirit upon all flesh and hasten the coming of your kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

O God, you made us in you own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on your whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that in your good time, all nations and peoples may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.