

March 25, 2018

Passion Sunday

Mark 15: 15-37

Prayer: Dear Lord, as we look at this familiar story, help us to see it with fresh eyes and an open heart. In the name of Jesus, who was crucified. Amen.

Not There

Anna Quindlen was a top-notch columnist for *The New York Times* before she became a novelist.

One of the best pieces on grief I've ever read was a column she wrote when her sister-in-law died. In her wonderfully down-to-earth style, Ms. Quindlen explored how we can be defined by those we have lost.

Ms. Quindlen and her brother were teen-agers when *their* mother died. With the death of his wife at 41, that same brother was a young widower. His wife was diagnosed in the fall with lung and liver cancer, and was dead by spring.

Days after the funeral, her two daughters, one a young teen-ager, one a toddler – were out shopping. Not knowing what had just happened to them and admiring their thick and lustrous hair, a salesclerk said kindly, “Your mother must have beautiful hair.”

“Yes, she does,” answered the teen, choosing to wrap herself in what was not there rather than explain.

The thing about some deaths, some losses, Quindlen wrote, is they are never gotten over, never resolved, never closed out. Instead, the loss – what is *not there* – becomes something that influences everything that *is there*.

Quindlen lost her own mom 25 years before she wrote that column. She foresees a day when her nieces will ask her when the loss of *their* mom will stop hurting.

In all candor, she will have to reply, “If it ever does, I’ll let you know.”

Sometimes the thing that is *not there* is the most profound influence of all.

A father who is not there. A child who is not there. A family who is not there. Police will tell you that the powerful pull of gangs rests solely on their ability to fill the void of something *not there* in the lives of young people.

“Homeless” is a word that people associate with this church. Many of our people are homeless. They are minus a home, less a home.

Many are unemployed. They live without employment, without a job.

I’m not sure any other group is defined quite this way -- by something that is not there. But the losses of home and job are so looming, so overwhelming, that they can become what define us.

So how do we deal with all this loss, all this absence, all this grief? The only way I know is community. Joining each other on the Christian journey and committing ourselves to helping a fallen brother, a stumbling sister.

What was it Lila sang? *Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.*

Today is Passion Sunday, the last Sunday of Lent and the day when we look squarely into the face of the horrible ordeal Jesus faced at the hands of the Roman Empire. We were not there to stand by him -- or to flee in fear as many of his friends did.

But I contend that standing by each other now is our option for following Jesus. Caring for the bereaved and the homeless and the unemployed and the disabled and the forsaken among us is the closest we come to standing by our Lord.

If you would like to read along with this sad conclusion to Jesus's earthly life, turn with me to **Mark 15**. Jesus has appeared before the Jewish religious authorities and then before the Roman governor Pilate. The crowd has yelled for Barrabas to be released instead of Jesus. As we read, note the mockery and derision and ridicule that inhabits almost every line of this account.

Picking up with **Mark 15: 15**, we read:

¹⁵So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

16 Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort.¹⁷ And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him.

¹⁸And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' ¹⁹They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. ²⁰After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

21 They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. ²²Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). ²³And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. ²⁴And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

25 It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.'

²⁷And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left.²⁹Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰save yourself, and come down from the cross!'

³¹In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³²Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

³³ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

³⁵When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' ³⁶And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.'

³⁷Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.

We have mentioned in here before that the Bible is in conversation with itself, and I think those two mentions of Elijah at the end of this passage signal something. And what is being nodded to is a very strange little story in the Old Testament.

The book of Kings contains the stories about the prophets Elijah and Elisha, mighty men of God from nine centuries before Jesus was born. Elijah was eventually taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. His protégé Elisha was left as the prophet of the Lord of Israel.

And as Elisha was walking one day from Jericho to Bethel, a bunch of youths ran out and taunted him by saying “Go away, Baldie” or “Go up, Baldhead.” Elisha called two she-bears out of the woods and they mauled the youth.

We don't talk about that passage much in church.

But as we dissect that story, we learn that it makes sense in context. Long hair, like Samson had, was a sign of the Lord's favor. So the boys were taunting Elisha on two levels. 1) By telling him his baldness was a sign of God's disfavor, and 2) telling him to *go up* out of this place as Elijah did.

In other words, they were mocking the prophet of the Lord. And mocking the prophet of the Lord was *considered mocking the Lord himself* -- purview of the wicked.

In Psalms and Proverbs, we read that mocking is “**the action of the ungodly.**”

And so this little story in II Kings was a way of showing God’s defense of his bald prophet by sending in the she-bears. Mocking the Lord or his prophets would not be allowed.

But here in Mark, we see a very different reaction to the mocking of the Lord. Mark tells us the authorities clothed Jesus in a purple cloak to ridicule his kingship. They fashioned a crown -- not of gold, but of thorns -- to make fun.

They saluted him in jest, shouting "Hail, King of the Jews!" They hit him, spit on him and knelt in fake homage.

They mocked him. They derided him. They taunted him. They mocked him again.

Mark is *unrelenting* in the way he tells this story. And the God who would not be mocked throughout the Old Testament ... takes it. He takes it quietly, somberly, all alone.

The oppressed Jews of the first century wanted a messiah on a white horse to call down mighty armies from heaven to shake off the shackles of the Roman Empire. Or at the very least, a messiah who could summon up a pair of angry she-bears.

Instead, they got a man in shackles, trudging through a trial with no defense, limping to the cross, taunted even by the criminals who hung beside him.

Our Christian story is not a pretty story. It is a story wrapped in pain and cruelty and dishonor.

It is a story of a man executed as a criminal in the most hideous way the empire had at its disposal.

It is a story of a man abandoned, forsaken, alone.

Mark hammers home this picture of Jesus's last hours more starkly than any other gospel writer. "My God, my God," his Jesus cries from the cross. "Why have you forsaken me?"

Why have even you forsaken me?

Historically, it's important for us to understand and acknowledge this ugly story, what we call the Passion of the Christ. But what are we to do with it? Are we to respond, and if so, how?

At Triune, we are choosing to respond in the weeks following Easter with some opportunities for community building, for laying down bridges, for addressing what is not there in our lives.

Last fall two people – a young man and young woman – came to me separately, but talking about the very same issue. Both were gay, and were glad to have found a welcoming congregation.

But both were struggling with a lifetime of hearing that being gay was wrong. They still had voices in their heads from parents, former teachers, employers, former churches. I assured them they were welcome here, but I could tell it wasn't enough.

And so we have asked our parishioner Susie Smith, a United Church of Christ pastor, to head up three sessions on sexual identity in a religious setting. Any gay, transgender or questioning individual is welcome -- as are any friends and allies.

I know that at least one of our partner church pastors is coming because she wants to know how to best approach her own parishioners who are struggling. And I believe Susie is using a new book by one of our other partner pastors, Dr. Jim Dant of First Baptist Greenville.

The other big issue that any church faces is grief among its worshipers. This congregation is absolutely no different than any other regarding deaths of friends and family members, whether natural or accidental, suicide or drug overdose. There are so many in here who have suffered loss, whose lives are pretzeled around something no longer there.

One of my close friends is an instructor at Greenville Tech who teaches about death and dying. She once told me that a huge percentage of our prison population – something like 90 percent – suffer from unresolved grief. It may be masked as anger or rage or self-hatred or suicidal ideation. But if you could peel away the symptoms, you'd find unresolved grief almost every time.

Something or someone not there, and a twisted, crippled life as a result.

Early in my time at Triune, we had a visitor from Indiana. This man had had a job and rental home there. But his 16-year-old cat, a Russian Blue, died. He grieved so hard that he lost his job and his house, and ended up in Greenville.

Even weeks later, as he sat in my office talking, he doubled over crying.

It doesn't matter if it's something that might not trip up the rest of us. I have known women for whom miscarriages were blips on the way to healthy families. And I have known women for whom a miscarriage was paralyzing.

No matter what the loss, the healthiest way through grief seems to be a compassionate community. So the second thing we are starting is a grief support group on April 12.

It will concentrate on the loss of loved ones, and will be led by Tandy and our social worker Robin Barton and parishioner Linda Martin, a retired counselor. For

starters, it will run on Thursday mornings for six weeks. But if participants choose to continue from there, they certainly can.

It is my fervent hope that people can find healing in one of these places. They may meet people in this church they haven't known. They may find encouragement, friends, support ... community.

We are all products of our environments, our families, our experiences, our losses. Dr. Sherwin Nuland, a doctor and professor at Yale, wrote a book called *How We Die*. His mother died of colon cancer when he was 11, and he wrote, "(T) hat fact has shaped my life. All that I have become and much that I have not become, I trace directly or indirectly to her death."

Anna Quindlen, as successful as she is, has felt the loss of her mother for a lifetime.

I have talked to people in this congregation who've lost parents, spouses, children, siblings, cousins, friends -- losses that echo and boomerang and derail them. I hope that if that's you, you will choose community over isolation. That you will try one of these groups and see if it feels like truth. See if it feels like home.

I've always wondered why we call this upcoming week between Passion Sunday and Easter ... Holy Week. It is filled with so much loss and pain. Jesus's trial and

whippings and torture and crucifixion. His death on the cross. The “not there” faced by his broken friends.

We know that God’s answer will come next week with the celebration of life over death we know as Easter. But on this sad and heavy-laden Passion Sunday, we look to the building of Christian community as the best way to follow our Lord.

Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.

I will lay me down in support of you.

Amen.