

SERMON
St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, VA
The Rev. Alexander H. Webb II ("Sandy")
April 5, 2012

<p>Maundy Thursday 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 John 13:1-17, 31b-35</p>

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Swing. Collision. Collapse.

On September 11th of last year, with tenth anniversary images haunting our minds, a demolition project began across the street.

The Jefferson College of Health Sciences, having moved into the old Community Hospital building, began tearing down its iconic, ten-story, 1950s-style academic and residential building. For two weeks, the entire downtown community stood transfixed as the massive edifice crumbled before our eyes. Every day for two weeks, the wrecking ball would swing at the hulking mass of stone, and little by little the walls came down.

Everyone knew what was going to happen: The wrecking ball would swing. Collision would be followed by the unmistakable sounds of shattering glass and crumbling mortar. And then, in the blinking of an eye, chunks of steel, concrete, and brick would tumble to the ground.

Swing. Collision. Collapse.

The demolition team used no explosives; they just kept hammering away at the building with a five-ton wrecking ball. The brick façade fell quickly, but the reinforced concrete core remained for what seemed like an eternity. Denuded of all adornments, with steel rebar hanging off of it like spaghetti, the concrete honeycomb seemed like it would never fall. But, we all knew that it would. We all knew that the building had no hope of survival.

One sunny Sunday afternoon, while St. John's Church was gathered for evening worship, the inevitable happened: After two weeks of constant assault, the core of the Jefferson College building surrendered its spirit. The once proud temple of academia tumbled to the ground, leaving behind nothing more than a pile of rubble and a cloud of dust.

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In the thirty years of his earthly ministry, Jesus of Nazareth stood strong as concrete against exploitation, corruption, and tyranny. He stood strong when the assaults of the world came against him, and it began to seem as though he would never fall. But, everyone knew that he would. As long as he kept teaching what he was teaching and doing what he was doing, Jesus had no hope of survival.

With the possible exception of Judas Iscariot, no one wanted to be in Jerusalem on that fateful night. No one wanted to see realized that which they knew to be inevitable. Peter had begged Jesus to let them stay in Galilee.¹ They were safe in Galilee, and they could have lived out the balance of their lives teaching, preaching, and fishing on the lake.

The disciples, like all of the other Jews in the world, wanted to be kindling charcoal fires that night and preparing to sacrifice a Passover lamb. But, the disciples would light no fire. Their lamb was sitting with them at the table, and they knew that his sacrifice was near at-hand.

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Historians in Jerusalem tell us that the Last Supper took place atop Mount Zion. From that vantage point, the disciples could see the whole of Jerusalem:

They could see the great Temple, the epicenter of Jewish religious life. They could see Gethsemane, a green valley oasis that would soon be stained black. They could see the headquarters of the High Priest wherein Jesus would be whipped and scourged less than one day later.

From atop Mount Zion, the disciples could see Moriah, the hill whereon God called Abraham to sacrifice his son. And, they could see Golgotha, the hill whereon God's son would be sacrificed.

Everyone knew what was going to happen. The moment was pregnant with anticipation, and from their upper room, the disciples could not help but see the whole sordid affair playing out before their eyes.

Swing. Collision. Collapse.

From their upper room, the disciples could see that the entire history of humanity and the weight of all sin forever was focused one person, in one place, at one time. Everyone knew what was going to happen... until Jesus surprised them all.

With his heart wrenched by sorrow, Jesus washed his disciples' feet with a towel. With his back breaking under the weight of sins that were not his own, Jesus nourished his disciples bodies with bread and with wine.

With the wrecking ball poised to dispense its fatal blow, Jesus nursed the bodies of his disciples so that they would have the strength to face what lay ahead. With hatred, selfishness, and evil looking him square in the face, Jesus responded with love and tenderness.

Though scripture does not record it, I suspect he wept, and I suspect that the disciples wept as well. They had done nothing to earn Christ's love, but he loved them anyway. He loved them to the end.

Swing. Collision. Collapse.

¹ Matthew 16:21-22

There is now a park on the site that was once home to the Jefferson College building. Grass grows there now, and in the last several weeks, pink and white blossoms have bloomed on its trees. An imposing brick edifice was violently reduced to rubble, but beauty followed in its wake.

As we gather in this room tonight, we all know what is about to happen. We know what violence is lurking just around the corner, and we know that Jesus has no hope of survival.

So it was for the disciples. From the upper room, Jesus could see the beauty that would follow his collapse, the garden that would grow from the rubble of his life, but the disciples could not. The violence and agony were too much to be believed; too much to be understood.

Both then and now, the agony of Christ's sacrifice exceeds the human capacity for understanding, but so too does the love. Christ may not be with us in body tonight to hold our feet in his hands, to fill our bodies with his body, to hold our hearts in his love. But we are here for each other.

None of us must walk alone the *via dolorosa*, the road of suffering, the Way of the Cross. We have the privilege of loving each other as Christ first loved us, nursing each other's bodies that we might all be strengthened to face what lies ahead; that we might be strengthened to walk with Christ in his suffering, to be buried with him in his death, and to rise with him to newness of life and fullness of blossom.

In the name of Christ,
Amen.