

Good Friday, Year A
The Very Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
April 7, 2023
Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16-25
John 18:1-19:42

The Medicine for the World

It took a thousand years. A thousand years.

Not until the tenth century did the figure of Jesus appear on a cross in any Christian artwork.¹

A thousand years of Christian history, of Christian art depicting the life of Jesus and the life made possible through him for us through his life, death, and resurrection. Instead what we find for a thousand years are images of feasts, celebrations; images of paradise—not heaven above or elsewhere but here on earth. Life and humanity and earth restored through the saving power of Christ Jesus.

Given how much for the second thousand years of Christianity, especially in the West, there has been such a focus on atonement centered on the agonizing death of Jesus on the cross of Calvary, it's almost impossible for us to believe. But it's true. Not one image of Jesus on the cross for a thousand years.

The cross was used, but it was always an empty cross. There was no body, no corpus, no corpse upon it.

I want to be clear: they did not deny that Jesus was crucified. They were not ashamed that he had been executed by the state. Rather, they focused on the life made possible through the cross on the other side of death in the power of Resurrection.

What did they know about the cross that we have forgotten? Or that we never knew?

¹ *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008)

An ancient formulation in Latin is, *Crux est mundi medicina*: “The cross is the medicine for the world.”

This formulation has been interpreted in many ways by many people. On this day when we particularly think of the cross and about the cross, I want to suggest one way to understand how the cross is the medicine for the world.

For those first thousand years, it was the equidistant cross that was used. The horizontal and vertical axes were equal in length. We see this preserved in a way in the Jerusalem cross. Do you know it? One equidistant cross with four more small ones, one in each quadrant. That’s one rendition of an equidistant cross. And that kind of cross is an ancient symbol in numerous cultures and religious traditions.

This cross is real and powerful. It is configured as the cardinal directions. It holds in tension all kinds of opposites. At its center, where the axes come together is the place of the greatest tension. And in that center binaries are dissolved.

Holding all of life’s apparent opposites and binaries in tension and dissolving binaries is what Jesus the Christ does—in his ministry, in his teaching, in his miracles, signs, and wonders, in his very person. He does this throughout his life and through his death and resurrection.

In dying, he destroys death. In rising, he restores life.

It doesn’t mean that we won’t die in these bodies as he died in his body. We will. It does mean that there is more life after death, after any death, after every death made possible through his death and resurrection. Every death. Every kind of death. Death of dreams. Death of relationships. Death of beloved ones, human and animal. On the other side of any death, every death, more life is possible in this world and the next because of the cross of Christ.

When we pray to “continue in the risen life of Christ our Savior,” we are praying to live that kind of life, a cruciform life. Not one that puts us on a literal cross, not some form of divine violence that is seen to be redemptive but rather a life that holds in tension everything that seems to be in opposition and deals creatively and justly with God and neighbor and even enemy, with self and other, with creation itself, the entire cosmos, and on and on.

Empowering us to live a cruciform life, a life that emulates Jesus’ life, is an astonishing way in which the cross is the medicine for the world.

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On this day, Good Friday, we hear the same gospel at every Good Friday liturgy, no matter what time the service is, no matter what the year is. It is always the passion of Jesus the Christ from John's gospel.

In this account, as we've just heard, standing at the foot of the cross are five people, five people who have gone with him to the very end, four women, one man; three Marys: Mary his mother, his mother's sister (whose name is not given), Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, and the beloved disciple who may be John the evangelist.

In this account, as we've heard, from the cross Jesus speaks four times.

His first words are addressed to his mother: "Behold your son." Not him but the beloved disciple standing beside her.

His second words are addressed to that disciple: "Behold your mother."

Death changes relationships. When a death occurs, relationships are redefined, re-evaluated, reconfigured. Sometimes space is made, and sometimes space contracts very quickly. That happens today. Things are redefined, re-evaluated, reconfigured. His mother is not left childless. His disciple is not left motherless.

Who has become family to you in the company of Jesus? Who has played the roles of the family that you have needed in your times of struggle? And in your times of celebration as well?

Who needs for you to take them into your family, to extend welcome and compassion to them, especially if their own family cannot or will not? Who needs you to be the person you needed when you were younger?

His third words are a statement of fact, "I am thirsty."

What are you thirsty for this day? Is your intention to thirst after righteousness, after right relating to God, to others, to yourself, to the creation? What is preventing you from drinking deeply of the living water offered to us in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection?

His fourth words are remarkable: “It is finished.” All done. He has walked that hard and holy road every step to the very end. Which is a beginning. Again.

It’s easy to hear the finality of these words and focus only on death. What I think is truly astonishing is what John’s gospel says after Jesus speaks those words, “It is finished.” Many translations, including the New Revised Standard Version which we use in worship, which we just heard, say “he gave up his spirit.” The Roman Catholic Bible has the better translation; the sense of the Greek is really *he gave over the Spirit*. Capital S, the Holy Spirit.

And that means that this is not only the moment of his death but also the beginning of new life for his followers in the Spirit which has been given to us. We stand silent in the face of it. When we think about it, we should really be shouting for joy. This moment is death, Easter, and Pentecost all at once.

The gift of the Spirit will be underscored and amplified in the resurrection appearances and in the amazing happenings on the day of Pentecost. But the gift of the Spirit to those who follow him is given initially on this hardest, longest, strangest day.

On that first Good Friday which was a Terrible Friday for those five faithful ones at the foot of the cross, because they did not yet know what we know, there was profound grief. There was deep trauma. Imagine a mother watching her firstborn son lynched by the state. It’s gut-wrenching.

There is no day of Resurrection without this day of crucifixion and death. Easter is reached in its fullness by passing through the death of this day and the quiet that comes tomorrow, the quiet of the tomb, which is also the womb, where new life is preparing to burst forth. Today, tomorrow, then Easter morning, at last. There’s no way to get there except through here.

So, we do not turn away from the cross. We glory in what the cross has made possible: a cruciform life for us following the example of our Savior.

In the fourth century, our Christian forebears understood it this way: let us mourn the crucifixion one day each year and let us mark and live the resurrection every day.