

MARK 15:33-39; 16:1-8

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At 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?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And 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." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son.".....

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

WHO WILL SAVE US?

Mark 15:33-39; 16:1-8

The irony is a bit overwhelming. Way back at the beginning of Lent, on Ash Wednesday, our Old Testament lesson was from Joel who proclaimed: *Blow the trumpet in Zion, sound the alarm upon my holy hill. Let all that live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord has come. Surely a day of darkness and gloom is upon us, a day of cloud and dense fog; like a blackness spread over the mountains a mighty, countless host appears. Their like has never been known, nor ever shall be in ages to come.* And I began the sermon by asking, “How often do we go from Fat Tuesday to Ash Wednesday in our lives; from the penthouse to the outhouse?” Joel was talking about a horde of locusts which were eating their way through the entire agricultural system leaving economic disaster in their wake. The parallels to the virus are striking, are they not?

Plagues strike in different ways. The one threatening us over which we have absolutely zero control is much more terrifying than locusts. We can't see the virus; we can't hear it; it is totally out of the reach of our sensory capabilities. We don't know when we have touched it or inhaled it or given it to someone else. Ash Wednesday was just February 28th and since soon after that we have been living in a Stephen King horror novel and we have no idea how or when the final chapter will be written.

And what that has done is to place us in an existential cluster of emotions which have drilled into the fragile core of our humanity and have led to deep questions of who we are, the meaning of our lives and the challenges we shall face in our futures. Who Will Save Us? These are times of great biblical proportions.

For most of our Easters, our focus has been on family dinners, egg hunts for the children and going to church in our best finery. But this Easter has a much deeper feel to it. Because we are now much closer to the gut of its meaning, the open wound that leads to the

resurrection. Our temptation is to skip over the hard part—the Cross—and jump right to the victory dance. But we can't do that this time. You cannot wave a magic wand over our suffering and change it into bright sunshine.

Let us remember what the Cross is all about for it has great relevance for our lives. If Mark's description of Jesus' final hours does not shake you up, it is because he leaves out the gruesome details. It sounds bad enough in Mark's shorthand account, but let me give you the unabridged version.

As I have noted before, the Romans reserved crucifixion as the preferred method of execution for insurrectionists to discourage anyone who might be contemplating a rebellion. Upper class citizens who were sentenced to death had the privilege of a quick demise by decapitation. Those less entitled, the common criminals, would be burned to death. But Jesus—if you can believe it—and those convicted of threatening the empire had to endure much, much worse.

When the Bible uses the word, "scourged", this is what it means—and I am quoting from the Journal of the American Medical Association: "The usual instrument was a short whip...with several single or braided leather thongs of variable lengths, in which small iron balls or sharp pieces of sheep bones were tied at intervals. For scourging, the man was stripped of his clothing and his hands were tied to an upright post. The back, buttocks, and legs were flogged either by two soldiers or by one who alternated positions. The severity of the scourging depended on the disposition of the soldiers and was intended to weaken the victim to a state just short of collapse and death."

And then the victim was forced to carry his own cross which typically weighed between 75 and 125 pounds on his back to the place of execution. And then he would be nailed to the cross with iron spikes between five and seven inches long either through the hands or wrists and then through the feet. The condemned would die from shock, asphyxiation and loss of blood. Brutal hardly even describes it.

From Mark's account, Jesus lasted three hours before he cried out in his death throes to God, *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?* And then one of the witnesses to this crime against humanity mocked him "*Listen, he is calling for Elijah.*" And the bystanders probably all had a good laugh and one of them ran off to fill a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick and offered it to him. And then they probably laughed some more and one of them said, *Wait, let's see if Elijah will come to take him down.* And then, blessedly, Jesus cried out loudly and mercifully died. Who would choose a death like this? No wonder Jesus prayed in Gethsemane that this cup would pass him!

Fortunately for all of us, the story does not end there. But in order to appreciate the ending on Easter morning, you have to appreciate the road to arriving there. And can you imagine the emotional state that the two Mary's and Salome must have been in when they went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body? Unlike the disciples, they did not cut and run when he was arrested and they stood amongst the crowd gathered for the entertainment of the crucifixion. They had to still be numb in a state of utter shock; grief could not even have hit them yet. And finding the stone rolled back and an empty tomb and what appeared to be an angel only added to their bewilderment and they were frightened to death. How are you supposed to process all of this? *So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

Fear, bewilderment and certainly grief are currently part of our lives as well. And adding to our viral woes, we now have the lid of the pressure cooker of our systemic racism blow right off the top. We too will have a lot to process going forward. And even if we haven't articulated it to ourselves in this way, the question of Who Will Save Us? is foremost in our minds. I could insult your intelligence and tell you like some have that the virus will just magically go away. And the racial unrest will calm down and everything can go back to the way it was.

I, for one, do not believe God has created our problems any more than God causes hurricanes or wildfires or earthquakes to teach us a lesson. That would be a very sadistic God

and it would be the very antithesis of the God we worship whose essential nature is love. But why are there viruses and all the other natural calamities that bring immense suffering to our species? I don't know. I guess they are just a liability of living on this earth. Not all mysteries are solvable and questions answerable.

But what I do believe is that there is an opportunity here which I am quite sure I will be frequently addressing in the future; an opportunity to right a lot of the wrongs we ourselves have caused. And I believe that one of the wonders of God's creation lies in the intelligence and creativity God has imbued us with. And we have to use it to save ourselves.

In closing, I would like to offer you a quote for your reflection from Ann Druyan who is the widow of Cosmologist, Carl Sagan: "We are 50 years into a period when scientists have been sounding the alarm...telling us that if we don't stop living the way we're living and doing what we're doing, we are dooming our civilization. And nothing, during all that time, has been able to awaken us from our sleepwalking until now. These are the days the Earth stood still. This is the first time when our whole civilization has suddenly realized that nature will not be deceived, that we can have leaders who manipulate us and deceive us, but nature will not be lied to. And so, at this moment, everyone is turning to the scientists, looking for a vaccine, looking for a remedy. Knowing science and history is the only way out of this, because if there is going to be a remedy, it will come from science." And frankly, my friends, the remedy for racial inequality and injustice, must come from within ourselves.

Joel told the people to repent. So if there is a resurrection in our future, will it happen because we have listened to God's warning and we have acted upon it? ...HE Is Risen! Will we be? is the unanswered question.

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