



April 5 / Sunday of the Passion

Matthew 27:41-44

The chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

To ponder

Her mother pulled [Ifemelu's] ear, an almost gentle tug, as though reluctant to cause real pain. . . . She pulled it twice, once and then again to emphasize her words. "The devil is using you. You have to pray about this. Do not judge. Leave the judging to God!"

—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*

The only judgment that matters

A small Nigerian congregation is rumored to have ties to dirty money. A young woman named Ifemelu has spoken hastily, adding to the climate of suspicion. Her mother pleads with her to not be so quick to judge others.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was the subject of many rumors. Even now as he suffers on the cross, pouring out the power of his redeeming love, he is mocked and judged. Those who publicly shame him cannot believe he is the Son of God.

Our spirits cringe as we read this scripture text because we know Jesus doesn't deserve this humiliation. But we also know he will overcome the powers of sin, death, and even the demonic ones. So we watch and pray, grateful that this wondrous love is freely offered to strengthen us when we ourselves are judged unfairly by the world. The only judgment that matters belongs to our God of justice, truth, and liberation.

Prayer

Gracious God, free us from the urge to speak with haste, offending those we fail to fully understand. Let our words always honor your wondrous love. Amen.



April 6

Matthew 27:45-46, 50

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" . . . Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

To ponder

As Reverend Deal moved into his sermon, the hands of the women unfolded like pairs of raven's wings and flew high above their hats in the air. . . . Then they left their pews. For with some emotions one has to stand. They spoke, for they were full and needed to say. They swayed, for the rivulets of grief or of ecstasy must be rocked. And when they thought of all that life and death

84

locked into that little closed coffin, they danced and screamed, not to protest God's will but to acknowledge it. —Toni Morrison, *Sula*

Jesus cried out

Many of us find it difficult to deal with the death of someone close to us, whether the transition from this life is surprisingly peaceful, extraordinarily difficult, or something in between. We struggle with the impact of the loss and the truth of our own mortality. We struggle to deal with emotions that make us and those around us uncomfortable and even afraid.

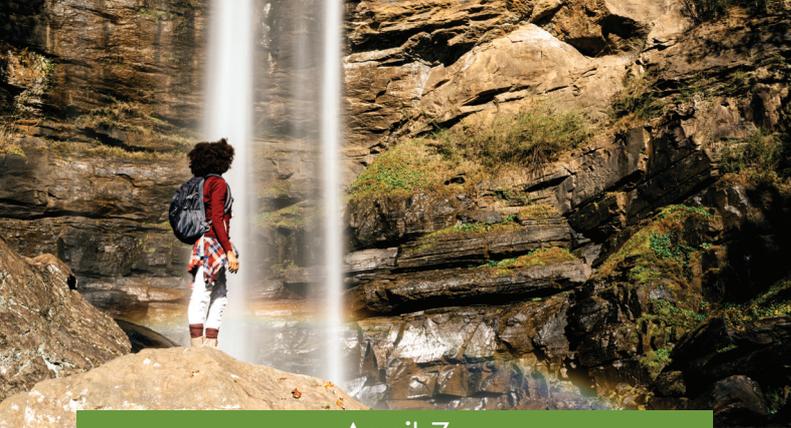
In crying out on the cross, Jesus makes room in the life of his church for all of us who need to cry out and express our grief with shouting and moaning and groaning, with swaying and rocking and dancing. He cries out for all who feel abandoned, and for all facing their own death or the death of a loved one.

Jesus cries out to God with the opening words of Psalm 22. This psalm also says: "In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame" (vv. 4-5). We too can cry out to God, knowing that we will be heard.

Prayer

Merciful God, whenever grief surrounds us you graciously draw near. We give thanks for such wondrous love. Let all that is within us bless your holy name. Amen.

85



April 7

Matthew 27:51-52

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.

To ponder

Paul confronted death—examined it, wrestled with it, accepted it—as a physician and a patient. He wanted to help people understand death and face their mortality. . . . Of course, he did more than just describe the terrain. He traversed it bravely. —Lucy Kalanithi, in *When Breath Becomes Air*

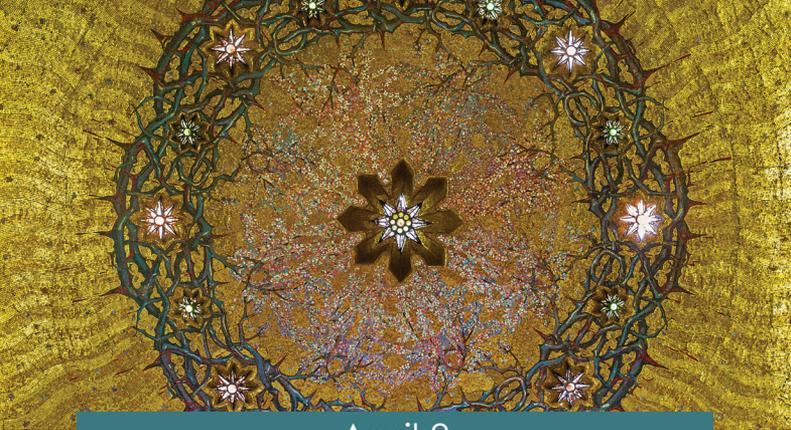
And when from death I'm free

A universal metaphor for spiritual growth is finding your way, discovering the path, walking the road. Early followers of Jesus were called the people of The Way, indicating that they were finding purpose and direction as they were being led by the Holy Spirit. As we walk this mysterious road, the way may at times seem completely mundane; at other times it may suddenly be illuminated by leaps of faith and transcendent experiences of amazing grace.

What lies up ahead? For the faithful, this is best described as a world immersed in the promises of God's wondrous love. Though this love may seem hidden as we encounter Jesus' suffering and death, God is with us always—even beyond death. As if to announce that promise in no uncertain terms, *Matthew 27* tells of earthquakes shaking open tombs and of saints being raised. My, what a road this is! The way of Jesus brings us to the grandeur of life restored and transformed.

Prayer

God of restoration and transformation, my soul sings with joy unspeakable: What wondrous love is this! And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on. And when from death I'm free, I'll sing God's love for me, and through eternity I'll sing on. Amen. (adapted from "What wondrous love is this"; ELW 666, st. 4)



April 8

Matthew 27:54

Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

To ponder

“During the other protests, I watched. And talked. So now I wanna do something.”

“Who said talking isn’t doing something?” she says. “It’s more productive than silence. Remember what I told you about your voice?”

“You said it’s my biggest weapon.”

“And I meant that.”

—Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give*

Lift every voice

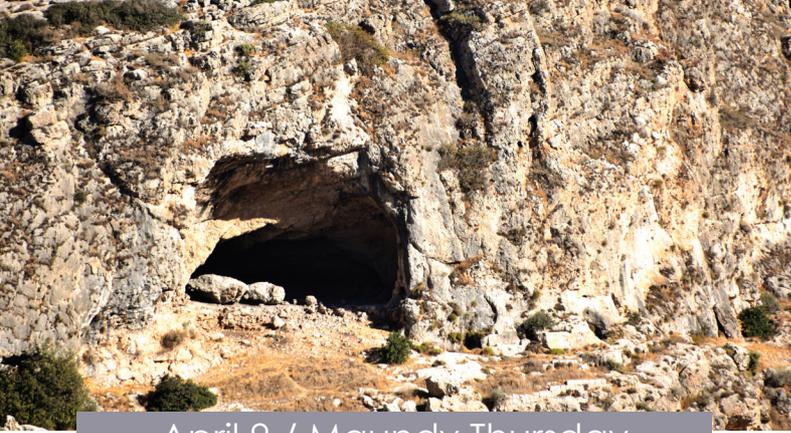
Up to this point in Matthew’s gospel the centurion (an officer in the Roman army) and the men under his command have obeyed orders and done what is expected of them. At Pilate’s headquarters soldiers put a robe and a crown of thorns on Jesus and mocked him as “King of the Jews,” then led him away to Golgotha. They cast lots for his clothes as he was crucified. They carried out the execution of Jesus, and no riot erupted. They have done their job.

But now the earth shakes, tombs are abandoned, and rocks split in two. Surprising events, but even more surprising is the reaction of the centurion and soldiers to this divine disruption: *This man was God’s Son!*

The centurion and his companions are soldiers, not prophets, but their testimony matters. It becomes part of the good news God calls us to tell the world. You have heard this good news, so lift your voice, even if you think you are the most unlikely person to do so. Share the holy gospel. Become part of the story of what God has done through Jesus Christ, because in the world of faith, hope, and wondrous love, every voice matters.

Prayer

Holy One, speak to us, that we may speak in living echoes of your tone. Amen. (adapted from “Lord, speak to us, that we may speak,” by Frances R. Havergal, ELW 676, st. 1)



April 9 / Maundy Thursday

Matthew 27:57-61

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

To ponder

By your deep expiring groan, by the sad sepulchral stone,
by the vault whose dark abode held in vain the rising God,
oh, from earth to heav'n restored, mighty, re-ascended Lord,

90

bending from your throne on high, hear our penitential cry!
—Robert Grant, “Savior, when in dust to you,” ELW 601, st. 4

Even the stones will shout

At this point in Matthew’s gospel all hope is gone. Jesus has been arrested, put on trial, and crucified. Now he is dead. Buried in a tomb chiseled out of rock. A “sad sepulchral stone” seals the tomb. To the world’s eye, this stone also seals his fate. The misguided Messiah’s ministry has ended. The prophet is silenced. The charade is over.

It seems odd to describe a silent, inanimate stone as “sad.” But in Luke, when some Pharisees begged Jesus to tell his disciples to stop shouting their hosannas, Jesus said, “If these were silent, the stones would shout out” (19:40). It seems that even stones can’t stay quiet about Jesus.

The one who lies in the tomb behind the stone is the one who was present at creation when stones were first formed. Stones scattered beneath his feet as he made his way to the cross. Very soon, behind this stone blocking the tomb’s entrance, God will raise Jesus from death and turn all creation’s longing into joy. Perhaps even the stones will shout!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, open our lips, that we may join the stones and all creation in singing your praise. You alone have given your life for the love of all people. And you alone are risen from the dead. Amen.



April 10 / Good Friday

Matthew 27:62-65

The chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, “Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, ‘He has been raised from the dead,’ and the last deception would be worse than the first.” Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.”

To ponder

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!

What wondrous love is this, O my soul!

What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss

92

to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,
to bear the dreadful curse for my soul?

—“What wondrous love is this,” ELW 666, st. 1

What wondrous love is this?

“The last deception would be worse than the first.” In the minds of the chief priests and Pharisees, just what is the first deception—that Jesus was able to rally a following? Are they jealous of Jesus’ popularity? Do they fear a possible uprising? Or are the chief priests, Pharisees, Pilate—and all the people who surround Jesus—unable to come to terms with his wondrous love?

Political leaders tend to rely on power, maneuvering, and political clout. In their minds, Jesus’ first deception might be “love wins.” But as the chief priests and Pharisees continue to plan and plot, we are just one resurrected breath away from the truth.

Fast-forward two thousand years. Many people still rely on power and political clout to make their way in the world. It is up to the baptized community of the Crucified One to both carry and live his message: Love wins.

What wondrous love is this, O my soul? It is the wondrous love of Jesus who is slumbering in the tomb and about to come to life forever.

Prayer

Gracious, merciful, living God, we offer you our thanks and praise for the greatest love the world has ever seen or known. Help us to bring your wondrous love into the world. Amen.

93



April 11 / Resurrection of Our Lord

Matthew 28:1-8

As the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

94

To ponder

Something strange is happening—there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. God has died in the flesh and hell trembles with fear. —Epiphanius of Cyprus, “From an Ancient Homily”

Go and tell

This is a day like no other. This is the day when God slumbers in the tomb. And as this day of days draws to a close and Easter morning dawns, all creation holds its breath to see what will happen next. What will God do with a crucified Jesus?

“Do not be afraid,” an angel says to women at the tomb at daybreak. It makes sense that the women might tremble in fear. Even the earth is quaking, according to Matthew. We fear things that are unfamiliar, and nothing is as unfamiliar as this—an angelic announcement about a person raised from the dead!

What will we do with a resurrected Jesus? The women at the tomb were not held back by fear. Like them, we can run to tell the news, sharing Christ’s wondrous love with the world as we go. He is risen! Alleluia!

Prayer

Risen Lord Jesus, you have taken away the sting of death. Please take away our fear. Empower us to live out our baptism and to serve you boldly in the world. Amen.