

*What is truth?*

Hebrews 10: 16-25

John 18: 33-38

[16 April 2025, Wednesday in Holy Week, Augsburg University Chapel]

Given that we will not gather on Friday because of the sacred holiday, allow me to share some reflections this morning on the centrality of Good Friday for our lives of faith.

The late John Buchanan, long-time pastor of 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church in Chicago and publisher of the *Christian Century*, once wrote of his childhood and early adult recollections of Good Friday services that stretched out over three hours as minister after minister ascended the pulpit steps to preach on one of the seven last words of Jesus. I, too, recall those Good Friday services, though as a young preacher's kid I'm not sure I ever made it through an entire service without a nap in the back pew – but maybe I'm not so unique in that experience!

The point is that Good Friday offers us a liturgical moment to consider the wide-ranging meaning and consequences of the crucifixion of our Lord – and whether we do that by reflecting on the seven last words of Jesus, by walking the stations of the cross, or by pausing in this Holy Week to mark once again the grim reality of the cross and the dark, fallen side of human existence, surely as God's people we cannot pass this moment without recognizing the centrality of Good Friday for our lives of faithful discipleship. Good Friday represents the nexus of life, death and life to come – Christ lived, Christ died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.

I am always moved by the full narrative of Jesus' passion as recorded in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> chapters of John's gospel, but for this morning I want to focus on just one scene from that story – the moment when Jesus has come before Pilate at the behest of the Jewish authorities who want Jesus to be condemned for his treasonous ministry. What a remarkable moment it is as Jesus and Pilate engage in this charged dialogue...

And then, finally, it is Pilate who asks the question that is at the heart of the world's response to a loving God – what is truth? Indeed, what is truth? And because Pilate and the world do not know the truth or how to find it, there is nothing to be done but to wash their hands of it all, to avoid the controversy, to send an innocent man to death...

This, then, is perhaps the central message of Good Friday – I have come to bear witness to the truth, Jesus proclaims, and yet the world doesn't believe, rejects truth out of hand, crucifies those who speak the truth.

Allow me to reflect briefly on the truth that Jesus brought into the world, the truth we mark today in the face of a world that still rejects the light.

The truth of Jesus' life and ministry – important to recall that what happens to Jesus in Jerusalem on Good Friday is in direct response to the ministry and message he has lived and preached – throughout the liturgical year, we read the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry and yet I wonder how many times we stop and think that this is what will turn the world against him – this is the truth that will be rejected on Good Friday. Do we understand the radical claim that the truth of Jesus' life and ministry make on us, his faithful disciples? I've been re-reading Wendell Berry's powerful essay on "the burden of the gospels." His two questions: If you had been living in Jesus' time and had heard him teaching, would you have been one of his followers? Can you be sure that you would keep His commandments if it became excruciatingly painful to do so? – think, for example, about the radical message of tomorrow's Maundy Thursday scripture and liturgy: gather, remember, wash each others' feet, love one another. This is the truth that the world did not know – this is the gift that is ours to follow.

The truth of Jesus' death – the reality that the world cannot accept God's love, the cross becomes the cruel sign of that rejection – for the world, it is the folly of the cross, the scandal of the cross; but we have seen the truth on the tree on Golgotha. Our spiritual father Martin Luther made the cross the center of all theology - it is the central moment of God's sacrifice for the faithful, the ultimate act of redemption for the fallen world. We can find the cross in all of Luther's writings (sermons, commentaries, essays – some 57 volumes). But perhaps we find the theology of the cross most profoundly proclaimed in his prayers: "Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled...I am weak in the faith...I am cold in love...I am poor...I am a sinner...Therefore, I will remain with thee of whom I can receive, but to whom I cannot give." For those of us who are called to carry the weight of the cross, those who stand at the foot of the cross and grieve, we are there with Luther who understood that the truth of the cross demands our humility, our confession, our repentance, so that we might receive even though we cannot give. God has shown us truth on the cross. And it was the centurion who proclaims the truth as Jesus breathes his last – surely this was the son of God. The truth has been revealed in the cross.

The truth of the resurrection – imagine yourself as one of those blessed few who experienced the remarkable surprise of the empty tomb – do not be afraid!, the angel said – this was scary and threatening stuff. Those who experienced the risen Christ in those days after Jesus' crucifixion were the gifted ones for they knew that the truth revealed on the cross would live forever in the community of the faithful, in the work of the spirit, in God's continuing love for God's world – but this didn't make their lives any easier. This is the paradoxical truth that lives on in the body of Christ, that continues to proclaim that as we bear witness to Jesus Christ, we bear witness to the truth. And that remains the truth unknown to modern Pilates and their world. This is the continuing threat of resurrection. The Guatemalan poet, Julia Esquivel, tells this story in her poem, "They Have Threatened Us With Resurrection" as she writes:

No brother,  
It is not the noise of the streets  
Which does not let us sleep.

Accompany us then on this vigil  
And you will know what it is to dream!  
You then will know  
How marvelous it is  
To live threatened with Resurrection!

To dream awake,  
To keep watch asleep,  
To live while dying  
And to already know oneself  
Resurrected!

This is the truth of resurrection, the glimpse of life abundant, truth that does prevail, light that overcomes the darkness.

This is the covenant that I have made with you, proclaims the letter to the Hebrews – a covenant, a promise made yours in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – a covenant that is grounded in the truth – a covenant that calls you to a life of faithful discipleship in a world that so needs to know the truth, but still asks Pilate's wrenching question, "What is truth?"

I have a poignant childhood memory of Good Friday – more than fifty years ago my grandfather died on Good Friday and all I knew, in the midst of the sadness and confusion, was that all would be well. And so it is. That is the truth. Thanks be to God. Amen.