

It is hard to talk about death. It is hard for me to talk about death. And so I begin with the words of another person, one who has spent his whole life around death. Caleb Wilde is a sixth-generation funeral director who has spoken and written extensively about death and how we human beings like to avoid it.<sup>1</sup>

He writes,

I don't like being around people who haven't been touched by death, who haven't embraced mortality. Death humbles us. I don't like proud people. Death brings us closer to our mortality. I don't like people who feel invincible. Death brings unanswerable questions. I don't like people who have all the answers. Death trains us in silence. I don't need people in my life who try to fill silence with words. Death unites me with every human, every thing — past, present and future — on this planet and beyond. I don't need people who separate themselves, blinded to this universal connectedness. Death helps us befriend sadness. (This is good) Death is the great iconoclast for superficial achievements. I don't want to hear about your career, your degrees, your bank account and success. Show me your soul. Death is the permanent reminder that we're human . . . Death is where I meet you, where you meet me. All the other [stuff] isn't worth this small amount of time I have to experience the magic and mystery of this cosmic miracle we call life. Turns out those who are full of life are those who've embraced death. Those are my people.

So let us, here on Good Friday, embrace death with Jesus.

Our friend Reverend Will Dickinson once began a Holy Week sermon with the following: “We know the end of the long, long gospel stories, and yet we place ourselves intentionally every year in the place of not knowing.” Today we ponder the cross and the crucifixion. Joy cometh in the morning, only later.

As someone who used to teach ancient Roman history, I know that today is also a day for pondering just how cruel that Roman empire's punishments could be, and crucifixion was a public punishment for enemies of the state. This is NOT, to be clear, the same as saying that Rome was a monolithic evil

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<sup>1</sup> Caleb Wilde, *Confessions of a Funeral Director: How Death Saved My Life* (HarperOne, 2017).

empire—many wonderful achievements in everything from philosophy to civil engineering were theirs—but this business of crucifixion came out of a culture that was very casual in its cruelty, and very casual about inflicting, as a matter of the state, the most painful possible death, so casual that, and believe it or not, this happened in Roman comedies, comedies that were staged for religious festivals, people would joke about crucifixion. They would say to each other, go to the cross the way we might say to each other, go to hell. And really interestingly, for me, Romans used the plural, saying literally, go to the crosses.

Think about that for a moment, the plural. Not only was crucifixion so common and acculturated, they would joke about it, but they used the plural because these deaths were dealt in *batches*. It's not just that our Lord was crucified in the middle of two other people. There may have been more. It's also that the death, the destruction, of a life that means so much to us was just part of a docket, just part of a slate, just part of a *work order*.

Yet for all that Roman callousness, that cruelty, I believe this moment that we shared on Good Friday is a moment for consulting our own hearts about our individual, personal *wonder* at such an unimaginable sacrifice. A moment to say that Christ died for me. A sinner like me. That's the perspective of the famous hymn, Were you there when they crucified *my* Lord.

This attitude for us as individuals is good and holy, and we should continue to do it throughout our lives. But what I want to say a little bit more about is what this means for us *collectively* and try to express some of the *collective* wonder in the Assembly today, as a congregation in general, as Episcopalians, as people who claim to follow Christ, and as human beings.

In all those categories, I would venture to say, from us here in the nave to the whole wide world, all eight billion of us and counting, you mostly see people who find it hard not to retaliate when we are wronged. And Jesus is not just wronged but tortured to death. It is an especially painful irony when we realize that the hands of Jesus, the hands that healed so many all over Galilee and beyond, are transected and maimed on the cross. Nothing could be more unfair. It is painful to realize that Jesus' voice, until so very recently, right up until his last meal, was announcing the message of salvation and forgiveness, is now the voice we encounter parched, frail, and yet, even at the end, quoting Scripture, even at the end raising a prayer.

We are indicted by Jesus' self-emptying gift of his own life, offered in love—we are indicted because we have not learned the ways of peace Jesus said "It is finished"—but what, exactly, is finished? Even today,

2000 years later, we are so capable of mob violence and mass cruelty, sometimes mass cruelty rendered in the name of the state, in the name of a country.

I wasn't sure but I decided to tell the story I'm about to tell because I think it's good to have our hearts broken on Good Friday: 82 years ago, on <Orthodox> Good Friday, April 16, 1944, the state of South Carolina electrocuted an innocent 14-year-old boy, a Black boy named George Stinney. He was barely four feet tall—my 5-year-old is four feet tall. He weighed 90 pounds. He was so small, in fact, that they had to put books under him, like a booster seat, to get the electrocution cap on his head. But it gets worse. My friends, the book that they used as the booster seat was the Bible.

Lord have mercy.

Man's inhumanity to man: does it ever plateau, or is it just one hellish crescendo throughout the centuries? We want to believe we are capable of change. We want to believe that we have heard and can act upon the Great Commandment. But sometimes the evidence on the ground seems very thin, very thin indeed. I don't know about you, I am still hungry for hope. It is so easy to tell stories of darkness. It is so easy to fall in to hopelessness. But that is not that is not the end of the story, and that is not the most salient message of sacrifice. And it is true, remembering what Reverend Will said, we can't fast forward to Easter joy, not yet. And it is true that the wonderful roles that Christ played for us people on Earth, healer, Savior, Messiah, those roles on Good Friday are in abeyance, a cold abeyance, an abeyance that brings doubt into many a heart, and where I find the hope is by thinking about Jesus Christ's identity as a teacher and a rabbi: our teacher, and our Rabbi. Because the fruits of Maundy Thursday are not just the institution of the Sacrament of the Eucharist, but the Great Commandment, one final teaching:, love one another, as I have loved you, even on Good Friday. We can remember that from Maundy Thursday, and I think we must.

I invite you now to take a moment in your own minds to call to mind a teacher that mattered a lot to you, a teacher who loved you and wanted, benevolently, for you to thrive, even though perhaps you were young and that teacher was sowing a seed that someone else would reap in the future: the way our teachers love us is a beautiful thing. So call to mind u a kind teacher that mattered to you, and then remember how *good* it felt when the teacher told you that you had learned the lesson, that you were ready to go out of that classroom and into the world.

Jesus today leaves behind the classroom of this world, and we are left with all of those feelings of loss and bereavement. But he also gave us a simple but powerful road map, to mend the harms of this world, to repair the breach, the commandment to love on another. We can hold on not just to that

teaching, but to the belief that Jesus wouldn't have left the earth unless he believed that we, the church, were ready to carry on.

You know, I started with that Roman story that probably made your skin crawl, about crucifixion as a joking matter. But I want to end with something beautifully Roman, from one of the great hymns of the church, the *Verbum supernum*. The line I have in mind is only four words.

But as as poetry, it's great. I'm pretty sure this is not an exaggeration: I can't think of four other words that say so much in so little, and the line goes:

*V*e*n*i*t* *a*d *v*i*t*a*e* *v*e*s*p*e**r*a*m*. All those V sounds. "He came to the evening of his life."

That's today, Good Friday. The evening of his life. But what was dust and darkness for him will turn out to be, though we don't know it yet, the dawn of the church itself. What a gift is this love of God, all loves excelling, that builds us up, even when the Life Giver himself is being destroyed.

Amen.