

Musical prelude at 10:00

Silent pause for late arrivals to enter

Welcome everyone, briefly introduce yourself

THE UNBROKEN

There is a brokenness
out of which comes the unbroken,
a shatteredness
out of which blooms the unshatterable.

There is a sorrow
beyond all grief which leads to joy
and a fragility
out of whose depths emerges strength.

There is a hollow space
too vast for words
through which we pass with each loss,
out of whose darkness
we are sanctioned into being.

There is a cry deeper than all sound
whose serrated edges cut the heart
as we break open to the place inside
which is unbreakable and whole,
while learning to sing.

Rashani Réa

First hymn: #11 Joyful Joyful We Adore Thee

Readings:

Easter without Good Friday risks sentimentality and vacuity. It becomes an affirmation that spring follows winter, life follows death, flowers will bloom again, and it is time for bonnets and bunnies. But Easter as the reversal of Good Friday means God's vindication of Jesus' passion for the kingdom of God, for God's justice, and God's "no" to the powers who killed him, powers still very much active in our world. Easter is about God even as it is about Jesus. Easter discloses the character of God. Easter means that God's [transformation of the world] has begun- but will not happen without us.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*

Jesus said:
If those who guide your Being say to you:
“Behold the Kingdom is in the heaven,”
then the birds of the sky will precede you;
if they say to you: “It is in the sea,”
then the fish will precede you
But the Kingdom is in your centre
and is about you.
When you know your Selves
then you will be known,
and you will be aware that you are
the sons [and daughters] of the Living Father.
But if you do not Know yourselves
then you are in poverty
and you are the poverty.

Gospel of Thomas, Saying 3, Hugh McGregor Ross, tr.

Justice is what love looks like in public.

Cornel West

Second hymn: #131 Christ Thou Word of God Once Spoken

Joys and Concerns (request that these be briefly stated)

Musical interlude (a short meditative piece)

Short spoken message or prayer

Invite children to go downstairs (they are welcome to stay upstairs)

As I prepared this message over the last weeks, two questions have been present to me: Why did Jesus go to Jerusalem? And, what was released when Jesus died on the cross? Those questions, and much of this message, have been informed by the brilliant work of Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, two contemporary American theologians, in their book *The Last Week*, which examines the account in the Gospel of Mark from Palm Sunday through Easter.

The suffering of Jesus on the cross has been referred to across the ages as “the passion of Christ.” And the word “passion” didn’t mean what it means today- a consuming powerful interest in something. It literally meant suffering. In a play on that historical meaning and our more modern meaning, Borg and Crossan claim that in addition to “Christ’s passion,” he had another passion, and that passion was for the Kingdom of God.

The word “kingdom” for us may sound irredeemably patriarchal and hierarchical. Yet, we need to remember that kingdoms were the only form of government in the world at the time of Jesus.

Kingdoms were all they knew. But a Kingdom of God, from a Jewish perspective, a Kingdom led by God, would be an entirely different thing than anything heretofore known. Because in the Jewish tradition, God and justice are inextricably united. You cannot have righteousness- being right with God- without justice. That theme dominates the Hebrew scriptures. So a Kingdom of God would be a kingdom where justice reigns.

In the Gospel of Thomas, the only complete account of what Jesus taught by someone who actually heard his words and knew him, written less than five years after his death, Jesus refers over and over again to the Kingdom of God, but those references are all about an inner, spiritual state. It is the inward reality that is at our center; it is like a treasure buried in a field, or a pearl of great price, or one very large fish caught in a net with a myriad of small fish.

In this, the most unfiddled with record of Jesus' actual teaching, Jesus comes off like a Wisdom teacher, more than anything else. Why would an esoteric wisdom teacher go to Jerusalem?

Jesus was as passionate about "the way"-*hodos* in ancient Greek, as he was about the Kingdom of God. The two are interrelated. The word *hodos*, meaning way, path, or journey, occurs 48 times in the Gospel of Mark, and variations on that word appear in Mark scores of other times. "The way" is following Jesus, "on the way", to Jerusalem. Implicit in that, is the idea that this is both a way of inner transformation, through some kind of personal death and rebirth, and also, challenging the domination system, literally following Jesus to Jerusalem to challenge the epicenter of injustice.

Early followers of Jesus didn't have a name for what they were doing beyond, simply, *the Way*.

The Kingdom of God therefore has this inner dimension, but also an outer one, which Jesus lived out in the community he formed around him. In that outer dimension: all are worthy, included, equal; God is present and available; there is enough for everyone; there is justice for the poor and powerless; and it is right to violate all social norms which contradict this larger reality of the Kingdom.

And the current governing of Judea by the Roman Empire, through the elite of the Jewish collaborators, severely violated the reality of the Kingdom of God which Jesus lived out. The temple elite, the "chief priests and elders" were responsible for collecting the tribute for Rome, and the running of the country for the Romans. The temple was the economic, religious, and political central power in Judea, and the temple elite were awarded vast tracks of land in return for their collaboration. Those estates displaced huge numbers of the peasant class, of which Jesus was one, turning them into impoverished landless serfs.

Jerusalem, and the temple, were the center of the social system of grave injustice. He went to challenge that injustice. He went to challenge their version of the domination system.

Domination systems have three characteristics: minority rule; vast income inequality; and the notion that organizing society this way is God's will (or in secular societies, that it's just the way things are). The Roman/Jewish elite version of the domination system, which was grinding the peasant population into dire poverty, is what Jesus went to Jerusalem to challenge.

There is no trace in Thomas or Mark (the earliest canonical Gospel, which Matthew and Luke later drew from and modified) of Jesus going to Jerusalem to die for our sins. That is a later interpretation.

When I held the question of *why did Jesus go to Jerusalem?* it felt clear to me that, much like John Wooman's going to visit the Wyalusing, Love was the first motion- the love for his people, the oppressed peasants.

And Jesus' time in Jerusalem was one long challenge to the Roman/Jewish elite hegemony which ruled all of Judea. The story of his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is well known to most of us. But what most people don't know, while Jesus was riding in on the colt of a donkey, at the other side of the city, Pontius Pilate was riding in with a retinue of soldiers coming to maintain order over Passover, when the city swelled to five times its normal population. And you can imagine Pilate on a magnificent charger, with ranks of soldiers in armor, and probably a drummer and banners- all the trappings of power and authority. And Jesus, not just on a donkey, but the colt of a donkey, riding in opposite him. It was guerilla theater! It was putting Pilate, the Romans, and the whole system to mock.

Then the very next day in the temple, Jesus challenges the money changers and the Jewish elite who profit from the collaboration. And in the days that follow, he continues to challenge that elite, making fools of them in front of huge crowds in the temple.

It's not clear to me whether or not he thought he would be killed for challenging the system the way he did, though the Gospels repeatedly stress that he thought so. I believe that to be an introjection of "interpretation after the fact." The gospels state over and over how Jesus was safe while in the crowd, with peasants like him; the chief priests and elders didn't dare try to arrest him with that protective host around him.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus refers to himself by the strange term "the Son of Man," which, with our modern inclusive language we often render "child of humanity." But the title "Son of Man" is a very explicit reference to the book of Daniel, where all the Empires, past and present, are tried by God and promised of eventual destruction, to be replaced by a ruler, the Son of Man, which will rule over them all. Jesus' mission, as described in the Gospel of Mark, was to challenge and overthrow empire, not to be a sacrificial lamb sent by an offended God to save us from our sins.

What was unleashed in Jesus' death upon the cross? As I held that question in prayer, I an image came to me of **an explosive conflagration of love**, expanding and moving ever outward.

I would also say, **an enduring presence.**

All four of the canonical gospels recount times of Jesus' appearing to his followers. It is notable that no one story appears in any other gospel, while in most of the gospels, different events are replicated in several. Not only are the stories not consistent, they are contradictory. In Mark, there is no appearance in the original version. In some, he appears in Jerusalem, in others, in Galilee. In one, he ascends on Easter Sunday, in another, weeks later at Pentacost.

These appearance stories are not meant to be understood as history- as an accurate accounting of things which happened. They are, however, meant to convey the truth of what the different communities out of which the gospels were written were experiencing. In the road to Emmaus, they don't recognize Jesus at first, then they belatedly realize that he has been with them. This story relates that's how Jesus appears- you don't always know it's him at first. And in the "doubting Thomas" story, the punchline that while it is good to have faith if you have seen Jesus, and therefore believed, it's even better to believe without having had the experience of having seen an appearance, that story addresses the reality that not everyone is having these experiences. These are stories about what it's like to be in a community, and some of the people are having experiences of encounters with Jesus, and others are not.

And from Paul down through the ages, we have recounting of experiences of Jesus' ongoing presence. George Fox's foundational epiphany being familiar to most of us:

But as I had forsaken the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those esteemed the most experienced people; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. When all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do, then, oh, then, I heard a voice which said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition"; and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy.
George Fox, The Journal, Nigel Smith, ed.

I have little trouble affirming these experiences of Jesus' ongoing presence, as I have had them, too.

Also unleashed was a **delegitimization of Empire**. Jesus' follower's sense that Jesus lives, signals that Empire failed, and therefore, that God is not on the side of Empire; Jesus' ongoing presence is God's yes to Jesus and God's no to Empire

And if Jesus is present beyond the grave, and that God has somehow manifested that ongoing presence, and thereby refuted the legitimacy of Empire, then they can conclude that "Jesus is Lord," which means that Caesar, who claimed the title "Son of God," and had temples for his worship all over Judea and Samaria, is not. So Jesus' ongoing presence threatens the Roman empire, which is why they tried to stamp out the movement, until they realized they couldn't, and coopted it instead.

- **Perhaps, the power of God to sustain movements for social change**

I see Jesus as either having been tapped into, or releasing, a power which can sustain religious and social movements, and which is still available to us today. Experiencing that power at work in his non-violent civil rights campaign, Dr. Martin Luther King named it *agape*. *Agape* is the Greek word for the kind of love which goes beyond the personal to be all-encompassing. Gandhi named the power he felt, followed, and worked through *satyagraha*, meaning “clinging to Truth.” Queer activist Mel White named it “soul force.” They each experienced something at work in and through them and those walking with them, and tried to put language on that power. I believe that was the same power George Fox felt when he said “and the power of the Lord was over all.”

Many of us have felt, and talked about feeling the weight of these times. That is the weight of the domination system, of Empire, of injustice on a massive scale, bearing down on all of us, and a premonition of what we stand to lose if it succeeds in its goal of domination.

We feel the weight of it in these times, and also the need for that power of the Divine.

In 2000, when I was clerk of Northern Yearly Meeting, we were considering whether or not to join the American Friends Service Committee in violating the ban on sending replacement parts for water purification systems to Iraq. Children were dying from bad water, and yet it was against the law to supply those infrastructure support components at that time, as Washington sought to put pressure on Saddam Hussein.

We were clear to proceed in both minuting support, and sending funds to the AFSC for that program. Then, someone said, “You know, they are imprisoning the leaders of this effort. Christopher could be sent to jail.” There was a pause. And in that moment, I felt the crystalizing moment of the choice before me: to do what is right, and perhaps lose my freedom, or to be complicit in what I knew to be wrong. I responded, “I’m sure that if that happens, that you all will stand with me.” At that, one person stood up, and then the whole body.

And in that moment when I made that choice, I felt a freedom and a lightness, like I had just walked out from under a weight I didn’t know I was burdened by, the weight of the domination system, always there, but not something of which I was conscious.

Borg and Crossan state that

The archetypal pattern produced by Good Friday and Easter is both personal and political. As the climax of Holy Week and the story of Jesus, Good Friday and Easter address the fundamental human question, What ails us? Most of us feel the force of this question-something is not right. So what ails us? Very compactly, egoism and injustice. And the two go together. We need personal transformation and political transformation.

Jesus’ death on the cross and the experience of his continued presence is resoundingly embraced as addressing the need for personal transformation, though what exactly that transformation

means varies a lot in the Christian tradition. But the political dimension is barely recognized. Without it, in Borg and Crossan's understanding,

...when only the personal meaning is emphasized, we betray the passion for which Jesus was willing to risk his life. That passion was the Kingdom of God, and it led him to Jerusalem as the place of confrontation with the domination system of his time, execution, and vindication. The political meaning of Good Friday and Easter sees the human problem as injustice, and the solution as God's justice.

Silent worship

Third hymn: #119 Christ The Lord Is Risen Today

"To live under siege, with the equilibrium and tranquility of peace, to prevent the spring of my being from being polluted by the bitter fruit of the climate of violence, to hold and re-hold the moral initiative of my own action and to seek the experience of community, all of this to whatever extent it has been possible to achieve it, is to walk through a door that no one can shut."

-Howard Thurman

God, help each and every one of us, to walk through that door daily, to be ready to shrug off the weight of Empire, to choose the hard path of justice and humility, whatever the cost.

Afterthoughts

Introductions (thank musician and tech support)

Announcements

Postlude and handshakes