To Face What We Most Fear

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for St. John's Episcopal Church
Good Friday, April 3, 2026: John 18:1-19:30

Have you ever come to the point when no rational thought you had, no logic, no thinking whatsoever, could even touch the feeling or the suffering in your body or your soul?

Good Friday is the day Jesus of Nazareth was in that place. There weren't many words that came out of his mouth when he was before Pilate, or when he was suffering on the cross. "You say so." "I am thirsty." "Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." "Woman, behold your son." "Today you will be with me in paradise." And perhaps above all, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus' Passion included so many of the great sufferings in human experience. Humiliation. Shame. Torture. Total abandonment by everyone close to him. Broken promises. Betrayal by those who should have known better, by the highest religious leaders in the land. Denial. Ridicule. Crushing disappointment. The death, not only of a person, but of a dream, of innocence, of hope.

Every culture, every tradition, has its genius and also its burdens. One of the great gifts of European-centric culture is its thinking mind. We have cultivated the intellect to an incredible degree with many wonderful

outcomes. But there are limits to what the intellect can accomplish. Most especially, the intellect alone cannot accomplish the transformation of character. It usually falls short helping us when we are drowning in sorrow and grief, suffering and pain. It is the wrong operating system. For that we need something else. We need the experience of transcendence, of solidarity, of the divine, not only in our minds, but in our hearts and bodies and souls. The overemphasis of the mind to the neglect of the heart and soul and body has contributed to the devastation wreaked on the earth, on women, on the queer community, on Indigenous cultures and people of color. Today is the day to choose to walk straight into the truth of who and what we are. To dare to experience the full story of our lives, the life of our world today, and the Great Story of our tradition.

Some things will not survive the current climate. Jesus, in his original form, did not survive the cross. On Easter we will see what resurrection looks like, but it is not the same thing as resuscitation. The dreams of the disciples for a new world order came crashing down. Their hopes for reviving the soul of their country and their faith fell into dust around their feet. Some of us have suffered great losses, personally. We have all suffered and are still suffering the violence unleashed in our city this winter and its aftermath by our own government.

It is precisely when we reach the outer limits of our own resources that transformation can happen. It is when we become utterly empty that there is finally room for the transcendent power of God to flow through and fill us. None of us can control or orchestrate that. All we can do is surrender to the truth, to let go our denials and resistance and

resentments, and face what we most fear, what we most grieve. It is there anyway. It is right there. With Peter, we may weep bitterly.

But the fear, the loss, the hurt, is not the only reality. It may feel totalitarian. But it is moving. There is a flow. There is a great story happening, a great transformation happening, and the only way out is through. We will come out the other side changed. We will not be the same as we were. There will be continuity and discontinuity. We know this because we have in the Great Story of Christian tradition a kind of roadmap of the human condition, of the ancient cycles of death and resurrection that are as old as time, that are part of the great mystery that is bigger even than Christianity, that we find clues about even in nature as a hint of green begins to sweep through the barren trees like the lightest stroke of a paintbrush every springtime, just when we thought nothing would ever be warm or green or growing again.

The most important thing we can do, this Friday we call Good, is to face it fully, with every part of ourselves—mind, heart, body, soul. To experience what is real and what is true, all of it. And above all, to direct our experience toward the divine, toward the God we know as love.

Anne Lamott is an author who has written many funny, poignant books exploring faith and her personal story, and one of her books is called *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. Perhaps the only prayer we can come up with to direct toward God in times of great suffering is simply, “help.” It may be spoken as a whisper, a sob, or a shaken fist. However it is expressed, if we are honest and open to the presence of God, something will come of it, especially if it comes from the whole self.

I know someone who was terribly abused as a child. She would sometimes go to a catholic church near her home, alone, and she would see the crucifix on the wall—with the body of Jesus hanging on it. She told me she would say to herself, "if he can do it, I can do it." That may not be your experience at all. But I know that the times of greatest suffering in my own life, when directed toward God, have led toward encounters with God that I would otherwise not have had, that changed me forever.

This Holy Week, I invite you to find time for solitude and contemplation. Find your own authentic and unique way to face what is real, to face what is true, and experience it with your whole self. And then find your unique way to direct this experience to the God you trust, and ask for help. Jesus said that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. If you face your experience fully, and ask for help from God and from someone you trust in this world, who knows what resurrection might come in the great cycle we call the Paschal Mystery. For today, let us find our stories in the Great Story, in the pain of Good Friday, and simply be with what is. Let us pour out our hearts like a libation on the earth until we are empty and ready for the Spirit of God whose wind blows creation itself into the darkness and the void, who moves over the face of the deep like a mother giving birth. **Amen.**