

**Fourth Word Good Friday Sermon**  
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley  
First Presbyterian Church, Colorado Springs  
Community Good Friday Service  
April 3, 2015

**Matthew 27:46**

“And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, la'ma sabach-tha'ni?" that is, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Here we are in the middle of our journey today – the Fourth Word. E'lo'i E'lo'i, la'ma sabach-than'i. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

We have arrived, at this sentence of absolute sorrow, of hopelessness, of what Peter Rollins calls the “central horror” of the cross. It is not just in the physical pain that Jesus suffers, nor the incredible injustice of an imperial political system violently silencing a perceived threat. The suffering, the horror of the cross, is fully embodied in those words – my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

I don't want those words to be real. I don't want to believe that Jesus, beloved Son of God, could have felt abandoned by his father in his time of need. And, because of Biblical scholarship, I technically have “a way out” if I don't want to believe it. We *don't* know that Jesus spoke these words from the cross. These words that Matthew reports are originally reported in the Gospel of Mark, the oldest of the gospel accounts. Neither Luke nor John includes them. They are scriptural words, important to a scripture-based community, as the audience of Mark and Matthew would have been – Jews, steeped in the Hebrew Bible, aware of the significance of these particular words that Mark, then Matthew, report as Jesus' last. These are the opening words of Psalm 22: in the words of the Common English Bible: My God, my God, why have you left me all alone? Why are you so far from saving me – so far from my anguished groans?

Could Mark and Matthew have included these words, not because Jesus actually said them, but because these words helped interpret the death of Jesus Christ for their communities? Maybe.

Even if they did, would that make the suffering of Jesus less real? It was real for Mark, it was real for Matthew. For them, it was something that *needed* interpretation, something that needed to be made sense of.

We cannot minimize this moment of the crucifixion because we don't want to believe. We cannot minimize the fact that *Jesus Christ*, the messiah, the beloved Son of God, really did suffer.

It's worse if he doesn't understand *why*, isn't it? It's worse when we have to watch someone we love so much be in such physical *and* emotional agony, and not be able to take it away.

I want Jesus, even if he suffers physically, to not have to suffer emotionally, too. I want him to *know* in his time of suffering that his God, his father, his daddy, will make it better.

But he doesn't seem to. His suffering is real, and ultimate.

Author Anne Lamott writes on suffering in her book *Stitches*. It was written and published shortly after the shooting in Newtown, at Sandy Hook Elementary.

She writes:

"... we have to admit the nightmare and not pretend that it wasn't heinous and agonizing. It wasn't a metaphor; it was the end of the world. ...My understanding of incarnation is that we are not served by getting away from the grubbiness of suffering. Sometimes we feel that we are barely pulling ourselves forward through a tight tunnel on badly scraped-up elbows. But we do come out the other side, exhausted and changed. It would be great if we could shop, sleep or date our way out of this. Sometimes we think we can, but it feels that way only for a while. To heal, it seems we have to stand in the middle of the horror, at the foot of the cross, and wait out another's suffering where that person can see us. To be honest, that sucks. It's the worst, even if you are the mother of God. Mary didn't say, 'Oh, he'll be

back in a couple of days.’ She didn’t know this. She stood with her son in the deep unknowing as he died.”<sup>1</sup>

We know that Jesus will be back in a couple of days. We know that in less than 48 hours we will celebrate Easter, the resurrection, the conquering of death.

But that knowledge still doesn’t take away the immense suffering of our world. It still doesn’t make the massacre of children less tragic, or the depression that leads to suicide *and* mass murder less real. It doesn’t take away the incredible injustice that seems so ubiquitous and unending in our world – the injustice that led to the crucifixion 2000 years ago, nor the injustice of the systems today that keep people suffering in poverty, or that lead to reactions of violence in an effort to take back *some* kind of control.

Today, today, Easter Sunday has not come yet. Today, we sit at the foot of the cross.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

**And yet, the question remains – *can* we sit in the horror of Friday without also recognizing the event and power of Sunday? Should we?**

Mark and Matthew didn’t. “My god, my god why have you forsaken me” is the opening line in a Psalm of pain *and* deliverance. The suffering in the midst of pain is absolutely real. But by using that psalm, a psalm that take its reader on a journey *through* pain, to end in praise and affirmation of faith, Mark and Matthew cannot seem to leave the death of Christ without also recognizing the deliverance of the Resurrection.

What would the story be without it? Peter Rollins tells a parable...

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<sup>1</sup> Lamott, Anne. *Stitches*. 2013.

“It has been said that on the day Christ was crucified a group of followers packed their few belongings and set off to find a new home. They were so distraught that they could not bear to stay in the place where Jesus had been executed. So they left, never to return, and after travelling thousands of miles, they set up an isolated village far from civilization. Once settled, they each took an oath to protect the memory of Jesus and live by his teaching.

“Then one day, after 300 years of solitude, a small band of Christian missionaries reached the isolated settlement and were amazed to find a community of people living in the sacrificial way that Christ had taught, yet who possessed no knowledge of his subsequent resurrection and ascension. Without hesitation the missionaries called the entire community together and taught them what had occurred after the crucifixion.

“That evening there was a great celebration in the camp. Yet, as the night progressed, one of the missionaries noticed that the leader of the community was absent. This bothered the young man and so he set out to look for the community elder, whom he eventually found in a small hut on the fringe of the village, praying and weeping.

“‘Why are you in such sorrow?’ asked the missionary in amazement. ‘Today is a day for great celebration!’

“‘A day for great celebration and great sorrow,’ replied the elder, who was all the while crouched on the floor. ‘For over 300 years we have followed the ways taught to us by Christ. We followed his ways faithfully, even though it cost us deeply, and we remained resolute despite the fear that death defeated him and would one day defeat us also.’

“The elder slowly got to his feet and looked the missionary compassionately in the face.

“‘Each day we have forsaken our very lives for him because we judge him wholly worthy of the sacrifice, wholly worthy of our being. But now I am concerned that my children and my children’s children may follow him not because of the implicit value he has, but because of the value that he possesses for them.’

“With this the elder left the hut and made his way to the celebration, leaving the missionary to his thoughts.

“It is in this place of radical uncertainty that we, like the community, can ask ourselves why we are struggling to be faithful to Christ. Here we can ask whether it is because doing so offers us some meaning and security in life or whether our commitment to becoming Christian transcends this.

“Holy Saturday...is a day that speaks of the absence of God and is as much a part of the Christian experience as the day before and the day after. It is the moment when we experience the depth of Christ’s cry on the cross, the moment when we feel abandoned by God and utterly alone in the world. This day is never as far from us as we would wish, for there are times when we all are unsettled by the feeling that we have been abandoned and that everything we believe may be nothing more than empty words and hopeless dreams. This is the horror of the cross, not the blood and suffering of an innocent, but the removal of God....

“It is only as we experience Holy Saturday that we can ask whether we would follow Jesus regardless of heaven or hell, regardless of pain or pleasure, whether we would follow in the midst of the uncertainty that Holy Saturday brings to our lives. It is only here that we can ask if we have truly offered ourselves to God for no reason other than the desire to offer ourselves as a gift. Faith does not die here, rather it is forged here.”<sup>2</sup>

Mark and Matthew cannot leave the death as it is, *not even Mark*, who ends his gospel by shutting down the news of the resurrection.

And even if Easter Sunday never comes this year – even if we imagine ourselves to be that community of disciples who leave after the crucifixion, never hearing of the resurrection – God’s transformative grace is still there. The resurrection *happened* in that community. The resurrection happened every time they made a decision to continue to live out the love that their teacher had taught them. The resurrection happens, in the words of Anne Lamott, “Every time we choose the good action or response, the decent, the valuable, [and] it builds, incrementally, to renewal, resurrection, the place of newness, freedom, justice....We live stitch

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<sup>2</sup> Rollins, Peter. *How (Not) to Speak of God*. 2006.

by stitch, when we're lucky. If you fixate on the big picture, the whole shebang, the overview, you miss the stitching."<sup>3</sup>

The grubbiness of suffering is there. It is there in the cry of Jesus on the cross, and it is there when children die, when torture takes humanity from the torturer.

What is our response to the death of Jesus Christ? What is our response to the *life* of Jesus Christ? Will we choose the resurrection the life of the transformative grace of God, even if Easter Sunday never comes?

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Lamott, Anne. *Stitches*. 2013