

The Problem with Easter

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Last week's Easter service was a joy.

We watched the flowering of the cross, and sang pedal to the metal hymns and anthems. The church was full, the after service treats delicious, and the atmosphere festive. Lots of old friends and young students were here. Last week's Easter service was a joy.

At the same time, something about last week's service unsettled me. It was, I think, that Easter came, as always, just two days after Good Friday. And on Sunday morning, I wasn't quite able to shake Good Friday's terror. In fact, if I think about it, I realize that for me, as long as I've been a minister, Easter's joy has never been quite enough to erase the horror of the cross.

The cross is ugly. We don't often stop to think about how ugly. After all, we wear the cross as golden jewelry, and so it is hard to feel bad about the cross in general. We see it every week on the wall, above me, and get used to it so that we don't see it at all anymore, really. We've become so familiar with the cross that we hardly stop to think about it—especially since Easter comes so soon after Good Friday, to divert our attention to more pleasant thoughts.

But crosses and crucifixions are ugly. For example, there is the crucifixion story told by Shusaku Endo in his stunning novel, *Silence*. This book describes how Japanese Christians were persecuted, five hundred years ago, after Christianity was banned in Japan.

It was like this. The authorities set two crosses at the ocean's edge. Two Christians were tied to these crosses. When the tide came in, their bodies were immersed in the cold sea water up to their chins. This was done so that they would not die at once, but only after two or even three days of utter physical and mental exhaustion.

On the first day, the two Christians sang hymns. On the second day, only the sound of their moaning could be heard over the wind and the waves. And on the third day they died. A European missionary, a Jesuit, hiding in the village where these two Christians were from, wrote in his journal:

"I had long read about martyrdom in the lives of the saints—how the souls of martyrs had gone home to heaven, how they had been filled with glory in Paradise, how the angels had blown trumpets. . . . But the martyrdom of Japanese Christians I now describe to you was no such glorious thing. What a miserable and painful business it was! . . . the martyrdom of these peasants, enacted before [my] very eyes—how wretched it was, miserable like the huts they lived in, like the rags in which they were clothed."

The crucifixion of Jesus was more wretched. More so, perhaps, with the hammer, the hammer, the hammer ringing in Jerusalem's streets, and the rusty iron nails, and crown of thorns, and the way Jesus was abandoned by all who loved him—even by God, according to the story.

It is interesting to me that all the gospels do exactly the opposite of what we do, in church, every Easter. The gospels are actually long passion stories with brief resurrection stories tacked on at their ends. The gospels spend many chapters recounting the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion—the painful march to Jerusalem, the mounting hatred of the leaders of the people, the Last Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane, the arrest, the trial, the torture, and finally the crucifixion itself.

I suppose that during the eight weeks of Lent we are asked to focus on all that. But Lent is also Spring Break, and our kids have sports dates, and the weather is improving, and work is busy, and no one, including me, really wants week after week of Sunday tragedy. The last Sunday of Lent, Palm Sunday, is actually a celebration, mostly, with Hosannas and children in the church aisles. And then, briefly, it's Good Friday—many of us are not even able to come to church on that day—and just as suddenly, blink, it's Easter. And somehow even though the Gospels focus on the pain and passion, at church we've magically passed the suffering and horror of the cross by.

Our practice of Easter is a sort of denial.

What do we make of the Bible's preoccupation not with resurrection, but with Jesus' suffering?

Well, it helps to remember the New Testament context. In those times, and for centuries after, as in the novel *Silence*, Christians knew suffering in their bones in a way that—thank God—we do not. The first followers of Jesus were persecuted. They were thrown out of their synagogues, mocked in the streets, disowned by their families. Many were thrown in jail. They lost their jobs. They were charged with being atheists for not believing in all the gods of the Roman pantheon. The authorities looked at Christians as subversives because they believed Jesus was Lord, instead of Caesar, in an era when there was no separation between church and State. And ultimately, many Christians paid for such faith with their lives.

So in a way that eludes us, because the times have changed, early Christians identified strongly with Jesus' passion. Jesus' suffering was their suffering, their future, their daily reality. And retelling the stories of Jesus' suffering somehow brought Jesus closer to them, made it believable that Jesus empathized with their plight, cared for them. The stories of Jesus' suffering suggested that the early Christians did not suffer alone.

On some levels, this daily familiarity with suffering is different for us, in twenty-first century Canada. We have freedom of religion. We've worked out the separation of church and state. We want a multicultural, multi-faith society—we've been hearing, lately, that diversity makes for a stronger Canada. We have wealth, leisure, and pastimes that make the idea of suffering seem odd. And, in fact, when we do suffer—perhaps because of a cancer diagnosis, or broken family relationships, or financial setbacks, or depression, or because we've taken the high road at some business meeting—we often play the denial game to the hilt, not wanting others to know, sometimes not even being honest with ourselves about our pain. We have not only banished Good Friday from our experience, but we disguise our suffering wherever we feel it, because there is this cultural meme, this unspoken sense that those who suffer are broken, or a burden, or a bother.

But suffering—for what we believe, or on account of the tragedies that befall us—suffering is not something we ought to deny, or ignore, or wink at in church. The reality of suffering, the consequences of living a moral and good life in a world where everyone else is cutting corners, the agony of pain—such suffering is still very much with us, even when we're at our best denying it. Believe me. I know. I'm your pastor. I've been in your living rooms, your hospital rooms. I've read your letters, seen your tears.

We see the reality of suffering in the good people we serve suppers to at Out of the Cold. We pass it by when beggars meet us at the subway. We worship across the street from Sunnybrook hospital and its palliative care and cancer wards. We see the reality of suffering in the suspicion with which all Muslims are treated, in the racism that First Nations and Black people still experience daily. We read about the reality of suffering, or hear about it on television, too. Christians have been crucified and beheaded by ISIS this year. People of all faiths have to watch their step in China, or Saudi Arabia, or North Korea and many other countries besides. And I haven't even touched on poverty, or war, or genocide.

And the Bible's story of Jesus' politically and religiously motivated arrest, and the Bible's story about the price Jesus paid for living a deeply moral life is meant, in part, to give us a reality check, to shout out to us that there is a cost—sometimes a terrible cost—for following in the way of Jesus. There may well be nothing we have to do when it comes to pleasing the divine, as I suggested last week; but there is no escaping the reality that most of us do, or will suffer.

And sure, after the long and sorry story of Jesus' suffering we get the Easter story. There is new life. The tiny persecuted Christian communities of the first century grew like wildfire because that new life meant that in their house churches at least, there were no more slaves or women or foreigners treated as second-class citizens. That new life meant community, and sharing everything in common, and forgiveness. That new life meant the moral high ground of the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's Prayer in their back pockets. Historically, that new life has helped shape the best features of our society, and finally, it gives us permission to dream about what follows after this life.

But in the meantime, suffering has not been eradicated. As Jesus died, so will we all; as he was misunderstood, so we will sometimes be mocked for our choices; as he wept in Gethsemane, so will we all weep, many times, even if only in the privacy of our homes. It takes great wisdom to face up to this, and not run from it through denial. But for those who face suffering, and share it, there are others among us who will help with the load, who will embrace you in spite of your trials, and who will generously reach out to alleviate the suffering of others, near and far—because we are followers of Jesus.

So sure, last Sunday was Easter. I'm glad. It was a happy, happy service! I have new life too!

Last week was Easter Sunday! So Hallelujah!

But first there was Friday.